

Challenges with Eradicating Child labour in the Artisanal Mining Sector: A case study of the Talensi-Nabdam District, Upper East Region of Ghana*

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Abstract

The issue of child labour in the burgeoning artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) economy of Ghana has attracted attention both locally and internationally. A lack of formal sector economic 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 ASM camps, where they participate in various dangerous and arduous activities. Drawing upon feedback from interviews conducted in the Talensi Nabdam District, Upper East Region of Ghana, this paper critically examines the challenges with eradicating child labour in the ASM sector and offers policy-relevant options for tackling the problem. In an attempt to put these issues into better perspective, the paper reports on the progress of a local NGO commissioned by the International Labour Organization to remove 150 children from the District's ASM operations and reintegrate them into the local educational system.

Keywords: artisanal mining; child labour; Ghana; gold

Introduction

On 10 June 2005, The International Labour Organization's (ILO) *World Day Against Child Labour 2005* was held in Geneva. The aim of the event, 'A Load Too Heavy', was to cast light on the growing child labour problem in the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector – the low tech, labour-intensive mineral excavation and processing activities prevalent in developing countries. Tripartite delegations from 15 countries that had previously signed accords committing themselves to eliminating child labour in ASM and quarrying in a 'time bound' manner were in attendance. The ILO's rationale for the event was made clear beforehand: that child employment at small-scale mines and quarries is unacceptable, and is considered a Worst Form of Child Labour¹ because of the extent and severity of the industry's hazards (ILO, 2004).

Importantly, in Geneva, there was significant representation from sub-Saharan Africa, a region where ASM is in a deplorable state. The region's ASM camps are host to disease such as HIV/AIDS, cause significant environmental pollution, and generally lack the requisite mechanization to raise participants' living standards beyond a subsistence level. The message now resonating in policymaking 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; Maconachie and Binns 2007). It is argued that the scores of young boys and girls now found engaged in a range of arduous activities at ASM camps, including heavy lifting, gold panning, digging, ore haulage and transport, are products of this poverty. In recent years, policymakers 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; ILO 1999; MMSD 2002).

Since publishing its seminal 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 now prevalent in so many ASM communities across sub-Saharan Africa. The organization has attempted to mobilize support for its campaign by pointing out that the elimination of the problem is 'an achievable goal' because the estimated proportion of child labourers in the sector worldwide is *only* one million; arguing

¹ 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.

vociferously – though at times, unconvincingly – that in sub-Saharan Africa in particular, there is a strong government commitment 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 publications the organization has since produced on the topic, however, have failed to galvanize sufficient support for tackling the problem. In fact, collectively, these documents provide minimal guidance altogether, both failing to pinpoint the underlying causes of children’s participation in ASM-related work and identify possible ways forward. The wider academic literature also offers minimal direction. The majority of its studies focus primarily on sector-specific environmental concerns and regulatory challenges.

This paper helps to bridge this gap by examining the growing child labour problem in ASM camps in the Talensi-Nabdam District, Northern Ghana. Drawing upon findings from interviews conducted with children and their parents over a two-year period, the discussion that follows provides an extended analysis of the poverty plaguing Talensi-Nabdam, and underscores the challenges with removing children from the District’s ASM communities. Parents have embraced the idea of having their children removed from the mines and supported in an educational environment but whether assistance for families has been both sufficient and forthcoming are issues that are being fiercely debated.

Background and Context: The Rise of Ghana’s Informal Gold Mining Economy

An Overview of Artisanal Mining in Ghana

Over the past two decades, Ghana has experienced a rapid and unprecedented upsurge in ASM activities. This has coincided with the implementation of successive structural adjustment programs and concurrent reform of the mining sector. The former have caused numerous layoffs, particularly in the public sector, and have made smallholder agriculture in many areas of the country unviable (Banchirigah and Hilson, 2008). This, in turn, has led tens of thousands of university graduates, former mine employees and marginalized farmers to pursue employment in the ASM sector (Hilson and Potter 2005; Banchirigah 2006). The initial aim of the latter, carried out under the auspices of the World Bank, was to revitalize a deteriorated and under-funded large-scale mining sector. Emphasis, therefore, was placed on overhauling legislation in order to attract foreign investment. In this respect, the effort was successful: the revamped

Minerals and Mining Law (PNDCL 153), 1986, is credited with having lured over 200 mineral exploration companies and attracting US\$4 billion in investment in mechanized gold mining activity by the turn of the century (Aryee, 2001).

In 1989, the government legalized ASM by passing the *Small-Scale Gold Mining Law, Mercury Law* and *Precious Minerals and Marketing Law*. Like their large-scale counterparts, prospective concessionaires are required to follow a streamlined process in order to secure a small-scale gold mining license, which entitles them to work legally on a demarcated plot of land approved by the government. Most of the country's ASM operators, however, have ignored these laws. They 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 a productive piece of land (Hilson and Potter, 2005), there are concerns, given the frequent encroachment of operators on to plots demarcated to foreign mining and mineral exploration companies, of there being very little viable land available for small-scale mine titling: an estimated 12.5 percent of the country's land is currently under concession to foreign companies (Ghana Chamber of Mines, 2006), and with the price of gold at an all-time high, indications suggest that it will continue to increase. Unable to formalize ASM through *ad hoc* means, the government, with the backing of various mining companies, has at times called upon the military to help 'control' the mounting illegal mining problem. These 'sweeps', however, have caused considerable damage to small-scale mining equipment and have been responsible for numerous human rights abuses.

Ghana's artisanal and small-scale gold mining economy, populated by as many as one million informal workers who produce over two million ounces of gold annually (Table 1), has mushroomed in the past 10-15 years, for the most part without formal assistance. Illegal operators are denied the credit, technological, economic and logistical support afforded to their legal counterparts. Though well-stratified in terms of labour and often deeply-rooted because of the involvement of traditional leaders, and high levels of investment in machinery and labour (Banchirigah, 2008), the country's illegal mining sector, whose operators are popularly referred to as *galamsey*, causes significant environmental damage, and features hazardous and unhygienic activities. Moreover, because they are generally unsupervised and unregulated, *galamsey* camps rapidly become locations of widespread prostitution, significant disease such

as HIV/AIDS, and – the subject of this paper – widespread child labour. Whilst various aspects of Ghana’s ASM sector, including the growing involvement of women, its impact on the environment, relations with large-scale operators, and health and safety, have been examined in significant detail in a host of studies (e.g. Aryee et al. 2003; Amankwah and Anim-Sackey 2003; Yakovleva 2007), at the same time, the child labour situation has been virtually overlooked. In fact, aside from a brief and rather uninformative analysis of girls’ participation in small-scale mines in the Akwatia and Tarkwa localities (ILO, 2007), to date, no paper has been published which sheds light on the drivers and implications of child labour in Ghana’s ASM sector.

Table 1: Gold production in Ghana’s small-scale gold mining sector

Year	Small-Scale Gold Production (oz)
2000	2,457,152
2001	2,381,345
2002	2,236,833
2003	2,274,627
2004	2,031,971
2005	2,138,944
2006	2,342,722
2007	2,628,290

Source: Minerals Commission

The composition of the published analysis on Ghana’s ASM sector is a reflection of the wider literature: aside from another ILO working paper that integrates selected case study analysis from Niger, Peru and Indonesia (Jennings, 1999), and Groves’ (2004) fairly comprehensive critique of an ILO project in Burkina Faso, to date, no studies of child labour in African ASM communities have been published. It is not a case, however, of the issue going unnoticed. The *Global Report on Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining*, for example, argues that worldwide, child employment in ASM has become a serious issue, reporting that ‘children start washing gold from 3 years on; from 6 years on they can be seen breaking rocks with hammers or washing ore...[and children] as young as 9 can be observed underground, and at 12 boys are widespread working underground in many countries and do the same work [as] adults’ (MMSD, 2002, p. 24). In the case of sub-Saharan Africa, there are reports of *specialized* activities for children at ASM sites, such as the *Nyokos* or ‘snake boys’ in Tanzania, so-named because they crawl through

underground tunnels like snakes, moving between the surface and pits to deliver tools (D'Souza and Jennings, 2005). But the reality is that children carry out an assortment of tasks in the region's ASM camps, work which 'ranges from children, helping their parents after school in gold-panning, just as they would have to do as well in small-scale agriculture, to full-time slave-like employment...[as well as tasks] not directly involved in mining (digging) itself, but in activities like transport of water, minerals processing and gold panning' (Dreschler, 2001, p. 6-7). This is certainly the case in Ghana, where the sector's complex labour dynamics have created innumerable job opportunities for children both directly onsite and in downstream/complementary industries.

The analysis that follows provides an extended analysis of the growing involvement of children in Ghana's ASM activities and the challenges with addressing the problem, drawing upon experiences from the Talensi-Nabdam District in the Upper East Region.

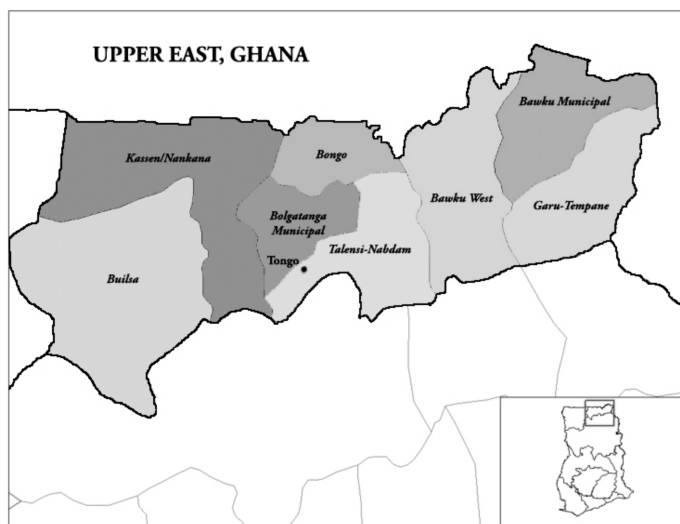
Artisanal Gold Mining in Talensi-Nabdam District

Talensi-Nabdam is one of eight districts in the Upper East Region of Ghana. According to the 1998/1999 *Ghana Living Standards Survey*, it is one of the most impoverished areas of the country: an estimated 97 percent of its people currently live below the poverty line (Canagarajah and Portner, 2003). Rocky highlands, torrential rains and few natural erosional buffering systems, the inability to use bullock ploughs because of widespread un-graded and stony landscapes, and rampant aridity confine the agricultural economy of the Upper East Region to the subsistence production of a small collection of crops such as groundnuts and millet. With few prospects in agriculture and most other trades, the region's farming households have struggled to survive (Whitehead, 2002). Economically, therefore, the intensive small-scale gold mining activities that have surfaced over the past 10-15 years in Talensi-Nabdam have been a blessing for the entire Upper East Region.

Whilst operations are widely dispersed, the highest concentration of activity persists in and around Tongo, the capital of Talensi-Nabdam (see Figure 1). Here, the Minerals Commission – the main promotional and regulatory body for the mining sector in the country – has set aside a 72 km² plot of land for prospective small-scale gold miners to register their operations. There are, at present, the following five

registered concessions in the area: ‘Accra’, run by the Accra Small-Scale Mining Group; ‘Tarkwa’, run by the Nontaaba Mining Group; Kajetia, operated by Unique Mining Group; ‘Obuasi’, operated by the Obuasi Small-Scale Mining Group; and Banteman, run by the ‘Yen Ye Ya’ Small-Scale Mining Group. Another concession, ‘World Bank’ (Porbotaaba Mining Group), is currently under consideration by the Minerals Commission. There are also hundreds of *galamsey* groups dispersed throughout the plot, some organized and working in small groups or ‘gangs’.

Figure 1: Location of Talensi-Nabdam District, Upper East Region of Ghana



At present, an estimated 10,000 people are mining in Talensi-Nabdam, although according to local government officers, this figure is ‘growing rapidly because people are getting ore’,² facilitated in large part by a government-backed loan dispensed to the aforementioned mining groups.³ These operations have attracted a wide range of people, including children: the abject poverty in the District, combined with the prospect of discovering favourable gold-bearing terrain, have led boys and girls of all ages to mining operations, where they are now found engaged in a range of activities. The deplorable conditions in which many of these children work caught the attention of ILO officials and triggered the launch of *Operation Sunlight*.

² Interview with government official, Bolgatanga, 07/04/08).

³ 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 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.

This project, which is being carried out by the local NGO *Afrikids*, is premised upon the following two ideas: 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 eradicating the problem. Its principal aim is to withdraw and rehabilitate 150 children 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’:⁴ 30 have been put into vocational training programs and the remaining 120 placed into 16 different schools in Talensi-Nabdam and Bolgatanga Municipality. It is against this background that this paper explores the link between child labour, poverty and ASM in the District, and questions whether ongoing efforts to provide educational support has proved sufficient for discouraging children from engaging in arduous mining activities.

The analysis draws heavily upon feedback from interviews conducted with selected members of the 120 families being targeted under *Operation Sunlight*, as well as its project officers and local school teachers. As direct recipients of donor assistance, the former were judged to be in an excellent position to critically reflect upon what is needed to alleviate local hardships, whether the quantity of support being provided is sufficient, and the extent to which educational support is capable of discouraging child labour at ASM camps. The study targeted sponsored children at three schools: Bansa (‘World Bank’), Fountain Gate Preparatory School (‘Tarkwa’) and Elim Full Gospel (‘Obuasi’). Collectively, these three institutions have absorbed 64 of the 120 children. During July-August 2006, January 2007, April 2007, August 2007, November 2007, and April 2008, focus groups and individual interviews were carried out with several of these children and members of their families.⁵ The aim was to survey a range of opinion about the efforts being made to tackle child labour in Talensi-Nabdam’s ASM communities, and more importantly, to gain a broader perspective from the grassroots about the challenges with resolving the problem.

Challenges with Eradicating Child Labour in Talensi-Nabdam District’s Artisanal Mining Communities: Perspectives from the Grassroots

⁴ A study was conducted by district assembly staff 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.

⁵ Interviews were conducted in English as well as *Twi*, the most widely spoken indigenous language in Ghana.

Any decision to reintegrate child miners into a school system presupposes that this is something that parents want; the extent to which officers at *Afrikids* took this into consideration before launching *Operation Sunlight* is open to debate. Discussions *hitherto* on children's school attendance in impoverished sections of the developing world centre on the issue of opportunity cost or the 'family-economy argument' (see e.g. Buchmann, 2000). This theory 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, p. 5). Simply put, it is often argued that 'from an investment perspective, the household compares the costs of schooling to the expected benefits from schooling' (Burke and Beegle, 2004, p. 335). Whilst a previous study (Hilson, 2008) argued that such an opportunity cost could impede the efforts of *Afrikids*, recent interviews with the parents of sponsored school children in Talensi-Nabdam suggest otherwise. Parents still seem to be pushing their children into education, despite the limited availability of tertiary educational programs of study at the local Bolgatanga Polytechnic,⁶ and for the most part, an ineffective National Youth Employment Program (NYEP)⁷ that has so far not resulted in significant income-earning opportunities for locals.

⁶ 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 92.2 percent (Peil 1995; Rolleston and Oketch 2008). Perhaps more so than most African countries, Ghana's citizens cherish education, with many parents making considerable sacrifices to send their children to school.

⁷ The National Youth Employment Program was launched with the aim creating 155,319 jobs and placements for Ghanaians aged 18-35. To facilitate this, The Ministry of Manpower, Youth and Employment (MMYE) headquarters in Accra have developed the following 10 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.

A Change in Strategy?

In April 2008, during a meeting at the ‘Tarkwa’ site with the parents of sponsored students at Fountain Gate Preparatory School, one woman, speaking on behalf of the group, stated that ‘we are here because we thought *Afrikids* people were coming out to see us’. Following discussions amongst themselves, it was explained that parents felt that the NGO was failing to deliver on its promises; and, when informed beforehand that researchers were coming to the community to speak to them, people assumed that it was the NGO’s staff, to whom they were preparing to voice their complaints. As previously explained, initially, *Afrikids* had committed to moving 120 ‘highly vulnerable’ children engaged in Talensi-Nabdam’s mining camps into local schools, and providing support to their families. The idea was to place these children in public schools, which, because of the *Capitation Grant*,⁸ no longer charge school fees. Each child was to be provided with one school uniform, one pair of shoes, three pencils, nine writing books and one school bag.

But it quickly became apparent that there were few public schools within commutable distances from the mines. With payment for private school fees not having been factored into *Afrikids*’ 2006-2007 budget, officers began scrambling to find a quick solution, eventually electing to place children within the private schools situated in close proximity to the mines; teachers and heads of schools were promised rapid payment for fees. The task of mobilizing these funds, however, proved difficult, and with no realistic means of doing so, the economic burden was eventually transferred to private schools and subsequently, sponsored children’s parents. One officer reflected on the dilemma during an interview, explaining that ‘we [at *Afrikids*] have difficulties taking fees from parents [but] private schools were not in the original plan – that is, paying school fees was not in the original budget – but it had to be done’. This caused significant agitation in target communities. One mother of a child at Fountain Gate alluded to how the once-promising situation has rapidly deteriorated because of these incomprehensible budget oversights, calling 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

⁸ The *Capitation Grant* effectively abolished public school fees at the kindergarten, primary and JSS levels: the scheme provides each child with a grant of ₵30,000 (US\$3), which is awarded to public schools to cover fees.

[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 ₵30,000⁹ per month for three months’. Parallel 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 parent 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]

Each of the 64 ‘sponsored’ students at Fountain Gate, Bonsa and Elim Full Gospel were informed by their teachers that they are responsible for delayed fee payments for the 2007-2008 academic year, which in many cases, amounted to ₵540,000 (or ₵180,000 per term).¹⁰

A poor understanding of the educational dynamics in Talensi-Nabdam has put its private school teachers in a difficult position. Each is well aware of the dire poverty plaguing the locality, as well as the importance of keeping schools functional. But failure to pay fees in a timely manner has prevented teachers from getting paid themselves: when it emerged that sponsored students had not paid their fees, the parents of other children decided to withhold their own payments. This has proved catastrophic for the district’s private schools. In Bonsa Primary, as of March 2008, teaching staff had not been paid in over five months, despite being informed by NGO staff that fee payments would be made by February. In April 2008, during a focus group discussion at Elim Full Gospel, teachers made similar allegations, claiming not to have been paid in over seven months. The absence of a ‘feeding allowance’, which is built into fee payments, has complicated things even further. Quite perplexingly, the ILO’s IPEC program does not fund feeding allowances but this would never have been a concern in the case of Talensi-Nabdam had fee payments been made in a timely fashion: once tuition is paid, children are provided a ‘hot lunchtime meal’

⁹ In 2007, the cedi was devalued. Today, 1 Ghana cedi (₵1) is approximately US\$1 or ₵10,000 of the old Ghana (cedis). All cedi values quoted in this paper, however, are in the old currency.

¹⁰ At Bonsa, the fees are as follows: ₵180,000 per term for SS and JSS; ₵150,000 per term for Primary; ₵120,000 per term for nursery.

daily at each of the private schools – normally, *fufu*, *banku*, or *jollof rice*. Under the present circumstances, however, with school heads having so few funds at their disposal, the lunchtime meal is rice water.

To their credit, teachers avoided, for as long as possible, asking parents for fees; but by assuming that the locality's educational system was capable of absorbing sponsored children without financial assistance, the district's under-funded private schools have been put in difficult position.

Mining or Education?

Charles is a 13-year old, *Afrikids*-sponsored student who attends Bonsa Primary. His aspirations of becoming a doctor could quickly vanish, however, if, as he put it, he 'is sacked from school'. Before breaking at Easter, teachers at each of the three schools informed students that if fees were not paid upon their return, they would no longer be able to attend classes. This is no fault of the teachers: again, with school fees not having been paid, staff salaries have also not been paid.

The view here is that failure to deliver fee payments has upset the dynamics of target communities, in the process *furthering* hardships and even *increasing* the likelihood of children's involvement in artisanal mining in the District. 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]'. Sponsored children were informed that the material support being provided – schoolbooks, uniforms, shoes, pencils and bags – was contingent upon them abandoning their work at the mines. As one child at Fountain Gate explained, '[we] stopped mining because the NGO said we have to stop, though it's plenty money, because they said they would only help us get back in the school if we stop'.

But the absence of fee payments and subsequent threats of expulsion from school have complicated matters considerably: the choice is by no means as clear-cut. On the first Monday of April (2008) school break, the 'Tarkwa' site was teeming with children carrying out a range of activities, including hauling ore and panning. The concession owner, '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:

'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]

The parents of many sponsored children echoed these views. During a focus group at Bonsa, for example, one mother explained that ‘even though [they] told them [the children] to stop, we wish for students to go to mine sites so they can fetch small monies for their fees’. In fact, prolonged neglect of the fees issue by the local government has increased the financial burden for children, several of whom are already being relied upon heavily, financially, by their families. Individual accounts provided by many of the children interviewed during this research, though wide ranging, do underscore this: ‘James’, a 13-year old at Bonsa, who reported ‘mining for myself and my stomach’, claimed he earns ₵20,000-25,000 per day ‘in shanking’; ‘Charles’, who is also 13 and enrolled at Fountain Gate, noted that he ‘earns ₵35,000 for five days work – plenty of money [here]’; and ‘Messi’, a 14-year old boy also at Bonsa, who reported earning ₵100,000-200,000 ‘for two weeks work’, all of which he gives to his parents. The situation is particularly dire at Nangodi – a site not included in this study but which is the location of another ASM camp with *Afrikids*-sponsored students (17 in total). Nangodi is a highly impoverished area 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 how many children now engaged in ASM in Talensi-Nabdam are the ‘bread-winners’ of their families. Many of the sponsored children at Elim Full Gospel, Bonsa and Fountain Gate claimed to be orphans, others reported that one or both of their parents had died, and others explained that they were taking care of their mothers. Thus, ‘threatening to no longer support [children] anymore’ if they ‘go back into mining’, as one child put it, would be a superficial diagnosis of what is clearly a complex situation.

One of the stated aims of *Operation Sunlight* is to empower the parents of the 150 children, which could go a long way toward correcting the child-dependency problem. But have the initiatives undertaken to this effect proved sufficient, and if not, what needs to be done? If children are indeed depended upon heavily by their families for income, it is imperative that each family is provided with the equivalent earnings once the child is reintegrated into the educational system or enrolled in a vocational training program. Thus far, each family has been provided with two female goats, presumably for livestock rearing; it was explained that each goat was vaccinated by a certified veterinarian beforehand, presumably so that

parents would have durable stock for breeding. When asked about whether the decision to provide goats was something arrived at by the target communities, it was explained that ‘the organization’s major concern is to sensitize the families’. The ‘goat scheme’, however, is simply one of a long list of ‘buy a goat’ programs¹¹ implemented in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years, aimed at helping to alleviate donors’ concerns about where funds are being channeled. Rather than providing monies, skeptical donors are increasingly being asked by a growing number of NGOs to purchase, for an impoverished family or community, *inter alia*, a goat, a cow, hens or seeds (Corporate Goat, 2007). Of course, such a blanket approach assumes that livestock is something that target groups covet, which in the case of Talensi-Nabdum, is open to debate. Many of the parents consulted expressed confusion over the exact purpose of the ‘goat scheme’, explaining that whilst 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.

But empowering parents directly with finance and credit could help reduce child labour in the district’s ASM camps. This would allow families to ‘kick-start’ small viable economic activities and trades such as basket weaving, farming and sewing, a move that most importantly, would enable children to be removed from mining activities without serious financial repercussions. Officers at *Afrikids* indicated during interviews that they do recognize the importance of ‘empowering family heads’, and that in addition to the ‘goat scheme’, they were working toward implementing interest-free credit schemes to facilitate the expansion of small-scale trading. Specifically, it was explained that people would be provided with credit and ‘trained to repay’: the scheme, in the words of one officer, will be ‘modeled after other *Afrikids* schemes’, which ‘encourage people to talk about what they wish to spend money on in order to plan and avoid loan defaults’. As of April 2008, however, these schemes had not yet materialized. During a focus group discussion at Bona, it was explained that the NGO’s officers, with the support of local government, did hold a meeting with the parents of sponsored children to discuss the possibility of implementing various microcredit schemes and ‘start-up’ funding for trading activities but as one woman explained, ‘they [the officers] have not yet come back’. Similar statements were made by parents at Elim Full Gospel and

¹¹ See e.g. www.farmfriends.org.uk or www.thecorporategoat.com

Fountain Gate. One woman with a child enrolled at the latter institution explained that on two occasions, officers from *Afrikids* returned to 'Tarkwa' but failed to continue dialogue about microcredit:

'They [the officers] say they would come and give us loans but they haven't in seven months. They said they would support us with loans for two years and that we would give back the money slowly. But we have not heard from them'.

During two lengthy discussions with officers at *Afrikids*, little was mentioned about microcredit for sponsored parents, apart from their 'proposals' and 'suggestions' tabled to the District Assembly for funding trades. During the latter episodes of this research, some 18 months from the launch date of *Operation Sunlight*, aside from a 'goat scheme', it was unclear whether a clear policy was in place in the District for empowering the heads of sponsored children's families, or the parents of child miners in general.

Overall Strategy

The removal of 150 children from artisanal mining camps and their subsequent reintegration into an educational or training program in an impoverished community such as Talensi-Nabdam is by no means straightforward. This view here is that, based on the episodes of research carried out in the District over the past two years, the execution of such a task is beyond the capabilities of grassroots NGOs, which generally have limited human and financial resources on-hand. What has made matters worse in the case of *Operation Sunlight* is that it may have been implemented without prior comprehensive analyses of poverty dynamics of the District, undertaking studies to pinpoint the factors fuelling child labour in its artisanal mining camps, and attempting to gain a better understanding of the educational system in the region overall.

The problems encountered thus far by the NGO in communities could be viewed as the unpredictable consequences of a genuine effort to alleviate local hardship, which has come up short due to a failure to grasp the full complexities of implementing such a program. This would by no means be the first time this has happened: as explained by Hinton et al. (2003, p. 103), although 'due consideration of the diversity of backgrounds (cultural, religious, economic, etc.), level of knowledge and varied perceptions of individuals in ASM communities is fundamental to the successful development and implementation of

technical assistance', an array of environmental and development strategies continue to be implemented in the sector without careful analysis of target populations (ILO 1999; Hentschel et al. 2002; Hilson 2006). In fact, it is safe to say that the overall support strategy for supporting the ASM sector is mainly 'top-down', featuring comparatively minimal 'bottom up' intervention. Despite the obvious difficulties any small NGO would have in implementing a project such as *Operation Sunlight* on its own, officers at *Afrikids* explained that they were committed to 'sticking with the exercise all the way through'. Whilst commendable, it would seem the interests of both the NGO and the target communities would be better served if the organization conducted an appraisal of its current methodology with a view to addressing the bottlenecks encountered so far.

Interestingly, it emerged at an early stage that the project would be unsustainable. This raises an important question: why would the ILO, whose officers felt that the child labour problem in ASM was important enough to be the focus of its *World Day Against Child Labour 2005*, allow a local NGO with no experience in this sector to undertake *Operation Sunlight* on its own and virtually unsupervised? When it emerged that school fees and feeding allowances were pressing issues, *Afrikids* submitted a revised budget to the ILO, which the organization subsequently pruned. As expected, both the budget for school fees and feeding allowances had been slashed as part of a revised program which officers at *Afrikids* claimed they rejected at meetings with ILO delegations in Accra. One officer explained that 'during the early stages, the Country Director rejected the project but upon threatening to withdraw, the ILO said "no"'. Why, however, would *Afrikids*, an autonomous organization with activities confined to Ghana, feel compelled to continue carrying out an ILO-conceived project which, in the words of its own officers, 'was [only] one part funded by the ILO and two parts funded by *Afrikids*? The likely answer was given in an interview with project staff during April 2008. It was explained by one officer that the project was not abandoned in large part because it presented an opportunity to 'work with an international organization like the ILO'. But should the ILO entrust a small NGO – irrespective of its intentions – with minimal experience in the ASM sector with a project as challenging and important as *Operation Sunlight*:

Without significant oversight from an international organization such as the ILO or private sector partners, 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, continued removal of children from

ASM camps will depend on several issues, foremost: the District Assembly constructing a public school, an initiative which, in the words of one NGO officer, 'if it says 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'; whether the District Assembly decides to launch credit schemes for the parents of sponsored children; fee payments being paid in a timely fashion and parents redirecting these saved monies toward family support; and the District Assembly continuing the project after funding has ceased. The latter issue is particularly important. Despite making a commitment in June 2007 to cover sponsored children's school fees in 2007-2008, *Afrikids* will not continue to do so the following year. In fact, it remains to be seen how fee payments for the 2008-2009 session and subsequent years will be made: the project itself ends in December 2008, and it remains uncertain about whether funding will continue following the presidential election, also in December 2008.

If the District Assembly *does* decide to continue sponsoring children in private schools, however, a more effective strategy of reintegration is needed. Delayed payments notwithstanding, efforts to date have resulted in children being placed in private schools close to their homes, an approach which is defeatist: if it is indeed the aim to remove children from mining activities in Talensi-Nabdam, it is imperative that they are removed from their previous work environments entirely and integrated into an atmosphere conducive to learning. Each of the three schools is located in the epicenter of mining activity, where sounds of blasting, crushing and drilling frequently interrupt lessons. Many parents also questioned the quality of these institutions, with one parent at Bonsa explaining during an interview that 'this school needs to be maintained, to be re-cemented and it only has three classrooms but it is up to Stage 6...how can our children learn?'

Discussion and Conclusions

Analysis of the child labour problem in the Talensi Nabdam District of Northern Ghana, and recent attempts to resolve it, raises several important issues for discussion. First, this paper has underscored how challenging the reintegration of child miners into education can be, even in a situation where parents are highly supportive of the idea. To do so, policymakers must initially come to grips with

why children are mining in the first place. The research has reinforced that children pursue work at ASM camps – in this case, in Talensi-Nabdam – because of family hardship, and that child labour in artisanal mining is a product of a wider, multifaceted poverty problem overall. Tackling the mounting child labour problem in ASM will require, first and foremost, 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. Fortunately, for Ghanaian policymakers, the majority of the children engaged in mine-related work in Talensi-Nabdam appear interested in attending school, and as this paper has explained, many continue to engage in arduous activity in order to pay for their school fees. If any attempt is going to be made to reintegrate child miners into education, there must be an array of support schemes firmly in place for families which more than compensate for the income loss resulting from a young boy or girl abandoning mining activities to focus on school full time. These schemes must be functional, sustainable and extend beyond the provision of livestock.

Second, to successfully execute a project such as *Operation Sunlight*, a consortium of stakeholders must be involved: regulators, international organizations such as the ILO and World Bank, private sector partners and NGOs. Whilst management of the day-to-day activities can be entrusted to a local NGO, it is imperative that its efforts are constantly supported and monitored. Without a supporting cast, relations between a grassroots NGO and community can rapidly deteriorate, as illustrated in the case of *Operation Sunlight*. In addition to the fees debacle, during interviews with parents, the NGO was also blamed for the lack of material support being provided to families. One parent of a sponsored child enrolled at Fountain Gate, for example, explained that ‘it was not *Afrikids* who came ahead to give us the uniforms – that they only provided us with children’s school uniforms only after we went to the District Assembly and complained about their slowness’. Another parent of a child enrolled at Bonsa explained that several of the uniforms were too small for the children, and that others were tattered, citing the NGO’s neglect as the cause of these. The principal problem, explained one parent of a sponsored child at Elim Full Gospel and reinforced later by many other interviewees, was that the NGO’s staff does not listen to their complaints, nor take into account their views on the support it is providing; one parent went as far as to accuse the NGO of ‘avoiding the parents’ altogether.

Naturally, when informed about how parents of sponsored children voiced critical remarks about what they felt to be broken, and ultimately damaging, promises, the NGO's officers were extremely defensive. In response, one officer explained, 'you give these people A, B and C, and they want D without appreciating A, B and C'. Criticisms directed toward *Afrikids* – many of which are perhaps unjust and should be redirected toward the ILO and the Ghanaian Government, which has not yet intervened and supported the cause sufficiently – have also likely led to the publication of grossly exaggerated accounts of the project. For example, the organization's latest project document, 'Operation Sunlight Year One Feedback Report' (Afrikids, 2008), tells an entirely different story to that witnessed, and those told by sponsored children and their parents during interviews conducted between 2006 and 2008. The report states that:

'Operation Sunlight has had an extra-ordinary first year. Removing children from mining and helping to build up the capacity of the poorest of the poor in a complex social situation was always going to be enormously challenging, and it has been. But against all the odds the project has met its goals and gone beyond them'. [Afrikids, 2008, p. 9]

There are serious omissions in the report, however, the most significant of which is the downplaying of the fees issue. It explains that 'after months of debate on the affordability of private school fees and the viability of expecting parents to pay these by the end of the project, the Ghana Education Service agree to building a new school in a community which has no state Supervision' (Afrikids, 2008, p. 9], at the same time failing to report on the financial implications of reintegrating children into *private* schools, let alone explain how delayed payments on promised fee payments have potentially sent an impoverished community into further disarray. Another concern relates to the descriptions about the project staff. The very project officers the report describes as being 'committed to the welfare of children' (Afrikids, 2008, p. 5) exhibited, during interviews, some animosity toward the community, attributing much of the blame of the project's shortcomings to the target families. Furthermore, the report notes that its staff members are 'constantly visiting the work of other NGOs and community initiatives' and that their work 'demands that they travel around the entire 912km² of the Talensi Nabdam district over rough terrain...[to] be advocates and mentors for the 150 children withdrawn from mining' (Afrikids, 2008, p. 5). These claims have been made despite near-consensus from interviewees that officers *rarely* visit their communities, and when they do, it is simply to threaten children about seizing their books, pencils and bags should it be discovered that

they are still engaging in mining activity. The involvement of the appropriate bodies from the outset – regulators, financiers, support groups and watchdogs – is the key to preventing a situation characterized by accusations and defensive reporting. It was explained during interviews that *Afrikids* deals directly with the ‘District Child Labour Committee’, a panel of stakeholders that does not include the Minerals Commission, the government body that effectively regulates ASM in Ghana. In the case of *Operation Sunlight*, it is imperative that not only the Minerals Commission but also the Ministry of Manpower, Youth and Employment, Ministry of Health and perhaps an international NGO such as OXFAM are brought on board, in order to make the project more robust and sustainable.

Finally, does the educational infrastructure in place provide an environment conducive for learning? In Talensi-Nabdam, where there are no public schools within a commutable distance, any program of educational reintegration must take into account payments for transport or fees for private schools. It is also advisable that, unlike what has been pursued under *Operation Sunlight*, programs 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. As explained in this paper, the current environment for learning in Talensi-Nabdam, into which sponsored children are being reintegrated, is *not* conducive to learning, and will continue to deteriorate unless the organization brings government bodies and other donors into the fold.

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 policymaking bodies. This dependency puts a considerable amount of pressure on an NGO, which is often expected to facilitate change. But when the dynamics of a problem are not properly analyzed beforehand, an organization with genuine intentions can rapidly become the subject of intense criticism. Failure to do just that in the case of the Talensi-Nabdam District in Northern Ghana has caused considerable confusion in target ASM communities and furthered poverty.

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