

The Dry Valley:

An Analysis of Social Challenges in the African Mining Sector.

As positivists would agree with me, even in the worst moments, there is always the possibility of national renewal. However, for change to happen, there must be a value system to guide the transformation. In this article, I have adopted an artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) case study in order to illustrate how models embedded in the African values and norms, such as the social and solidarity economy (SSE) model, is a viable mechanism for fixing the leadership and governance challenges facing the continent at large, and specifically the mining sector.

By Francis Onditi



Why things are the way they are

I wrote this article after meeting a friend at a café in Hillcrest Boulevard, Brooklyn area, Pretoria, South Africa. Brooklyn is an affluent suburb, surrounded by high-end residential neighbourhoods and some prestigious learning institutions – the shopping complex is not far from the University of Pretoria. It was ideal place to take a break from office work and meditate. Close to where I sat waiting for my guest was a notice that read, 'These Tables are Strictly for the Patrons of Café Grenadine!' The word 'Patrons' in the phrase troubled me. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'patron' as 'financier'. Political economists use the term carefully, because it means 'owners of wealth'. The term thus implies that individuals can be distinguished as either 'haves' or 'have nots'. Yet what troubled me most is not whether the space in question was meant for those who own the wealth. Rather, it was the connotation of the word, which points to societal disorders, such as feudalism, inequality, exclusion and all sorts of segregation.

My experience in the café emphasized that the world around us is constructed. Moreover, our thinking habits, actions, behavior and interactions within society are all shaped by religious, cultural, technological and political values and norms. Leadership and governance represent a small portion of this value system. Indeed, these values and norms are the sum of socially informed behaviours, human-environmental interactions and various forms of transformation, including

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new models and policies. In this process of transformation, it is important that we continue searching for desirable values and norms. Natural wisdom suggests that one way of achieving that which is desirable is to develop new directions in thinking, thus stimulating individual and collective forms of societal change for a better future. This type

of multilateral social change is then the product of 'thought leadership'. In this article, I would like to help readers understand why it is important to constantly rethink existing models and policies. To do so, I will investigate two paradoxes that I have experienced.

The first paradox

During my early days of schooling in the late 1980s and 1990s in western Kenya, it was not unusual to find me or my other siblings in the nearest market trying to make ends meet by selling simple farm produce. Our mother, Sarah Mbone, who also was an ardent small-scale business woman, constantly reminded us that, 'Vana vange ikivara ni kidinyu, kuduka uturi orogeri kunanga onyore ichuria ...', which is loosely translated as, 'I urge you my

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children, life is hard, you must sweat to get food in this world...'. This narrative formed part of our family lore. My mother's world view shaped my value system. I was taught to be thoughtful, diligent, courageous, compassionate and honest. Moreover, life for us was a matter of balancing business and school. In order to achieve such a balance, we had to constantly search for new market opportunities in different locations.

Mbale, which is a small town located along the Kisumu-Kakamega highway, was one such location. It also happened that there were small-scale mining sites scattered across the municipality. One of the mining sites was located along Muhedwe valley, popularly known as Mukichutu. The small-scale mining in the valley formed a hub of activity, with a booming economy, high cash flow and rapid growth of new business ventures. The surrounding community members were actively engaged along the value chain. However, there was no strategic direction and the

miners and other stakeholders along the chain were only engaged in short-term activities. The miners' mind-set was framed by a narrow world view. The mining came to an abrupt end and the valley turned into a ghost village.

The second paradox: twenty-six years later

Twenty-six years later, in 2017, I was a professional working with a United Nations (UN) agency on a mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), at the Inga Dam in Matadi, about 264 km from the capital city, Kinshasa, on the border with Cambinda, Angola. The aim of the mission was to provide expertise and advice to the UN office in Kinshasa on how to develop conflict transformation strategies to be used by the government in order to harness the potential of the dam for the benefit of the community surrounding the Congo River. Harnessing this potential meant lighting up and powering Africa. The dam was estimated to cost US \$80 billion and would generate 44,000 megawatts, with capacity to distribute electricity to the entire sub-Saharan Africa regional electricity power pool (Green, Benjamin, Sovacool and Hancock, 2015). The initial plan identified South Africa, the World Bank, and the African Development Bank as the main funders.

It was not difficult to visualise how the African continent could attain industrial capacity by investing in power generation. But the paradox is that the planned construction of the dams and the associated infrastructure have been stuck in limbo since the 1960s. In what experts have termed as a 'potent fantasy', the failure lies with lack of governance (Deshmukh, Mileva and Wu, 2018). The recommissioned package remains socially, economically and environmentally unviable. Moreover, the rewards have been and are likely to continue benefiting the corporate power companies rather than meeting the needs of the local population. As we went around the communities surrounding this dam, we were shocked: no household seemed to have access to the power lines. The villages were the agrarian type, separated from each by the dense forest and the river. In the local market, the largely barter trade dealings and the groups of women carrying gigantic bunches of bananas on their heads indicated a huge disconnect between the grand strategy and the demands of the local population.

From the government records, we established that the power generated from the dam largely supplied other countries across the southern African region.

The dry valley

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The ASM sub-sector is (not) entirely dry

The ASM sub-sector provides various forms of opportunities for employment and the reduction of poverty. In the South African Development Community, Zambia's extractive industry sector is a major economic driver, contributing up to 11% of the gross domestic product. The effects can be seen in job creation, increased revenue and opportunities for growth and development (UNDP, 2014). Yet despite its ample mineral resources, Zambia remains one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 141 out of 169 on the 2014 Human Development Index. The Gender Gap Index (Samans, Jennifer, Gemma and Margareta, 2015) of the World Economic Forum ranks Zambia 119 out of 136.

The DRC also has a large ASM sector, regardless of its systemic and structural challenges. It is estimated that up to two million people work as artisanal miners across the DRC, representing a significant economic opportunity for Congolese citizens (Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, 2015). Unlike the global trend, in the DRC 90% of minerals exported are produced by ASM and only 10% by large-scale mining (Hayes and Perks, 2012). In this country, as in other African countries, women

perform support service work to the ASM sector and seldom engage in the physical act of mining. In Ghana, 50% of the *galamsey* population (illegal small-scale gold miners) are women, as are 75% of the small-scale salt mining workforce and 80% of stone quarry workers (Addei and Amankwah, 2011). ASM is seen in both these countries as being lucrative, with the potential to stimulate local/national entrepreneurship, improve livelihoods and advance integrated rural social and economic development.

Despite all these opportunities offered by ASM, the sub-sector is confronted with systemic and structural challenges, inequalities, health risks and poor economic prospects, particularly for women. Women are at a disadvantage owing to their exclusion from the value chain, largely because of policy inconsistencies and disproportionate power relations between the genders in society. Moreover, while an economy that applies 'sustainability' principles tends to thrive at the community level, the act of balancing economic exploitation with adherence to the social values in ASM at a larger scale remains delicate. Yet integrating social and environmental values in the sub-sector could be a 'thoughtful' way of strengthening leadership and governance in ASM in Africa.

The overly 'growth'-based models have made it difficult to fix the 'real' challenge facing the ASM: i.e. gender inequality. There exist a plethora of studies addressing the question of governance in the mining sub-sector (Campbell, 2006). However, none of these draws in the 'thoughtful' principles that are embedded in the African philosophies and value system. This article delves into the question of whether the SSE model is a viable praxis for achieving inclusivity in ASM. It is argued that, while ASM has played an important role in creating avenues for economic empowerment in countries such as Zambia, the DRC and Ghana, social exclusion remains, resulting in the metaphorical dry valley. The question is, then: how do you bring back life to the valley?

How to breathe life into the dry valley

The SSE approach is based on the following underlying assumptions: social enterprises a) are collective initiatives; b) are democratically owned and/or operated; c) undertake activities with social usefulness; and d) involve the wider community

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in their operations (Saguié and Brent, 2014). The SSE model can also be used to create a conducive atmosphere for inculcating democratic principles necessary for inclusive development processes (Laville, 2003). Women miners in Zambia, the DRC and Ghana have formed into cooperative societies not only as a means of benefiting from economies of scale but also as a way to increase their bargaining power in the ASM sector. This approach reflects the principles of SSE, especially that of ‘one person one vote,’ and portents increasing capacity among women to participate in decision-making processes at various levels, from organizational to national.

With regard to sustainability, SSE has the potential to support economies in an efficient and effective manner, promoting learning and knowledge building. For this to happen, however, greater coherence is needed – not only within organisations, but among activities, communities and regions. SSE fits well with women’s indirect participation in ASM, particularly in supportive roles such as bookkeepers, security guards, cooks

and nannies who take care of children brought to site by women miners. These ‘ancillary roles’ are often not factored into official estimates of mining, meaning that women’s involvement in the ASM sector may be significantly under-estimated and unreported (Hinton and Beinhoff, 2003; Hinton, Veiga and Veiga, 2003).

SSE, when viewed from an ideological perspective, is a movement away from an economics that is self-interested towards a culture of cooperation, inclusion, self-help groups and associations (Cangian, 2016). Indeed, Dash argues that the problem facing the world of development spreads beyond economics; there are ideological, institutional and epistemological systemic issues. It is therefore logical to embrace SSE in promoting networks and organising women within ASM as a means of revitalising the dry valley. Dash (2014) notes that, the alternative epistemology built around a superior social ontology of inter-relationality, as well as philosophical principles different from logical positivism (monism) and individualism (atomism), [are necessary] for us to gain the confidence and the capacity to think SSE more boldly, shape economic practices and policies more coherently, and develop well-governed and efficient institutions in SSE more creatively (9).

The other benefit of conceiving ASM within the rubric of SSE is that building trust among players in SSE-led mining is likely to address negative externalities arising from the tyranny of capitalism. Some scholars have espoused that SSE is a response

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to the dominant capitalist system (Marques, 2014). It is a model that aims to liberate communities from neoliberal globalisation and pave the way for a more equal and sustainable society, particularly with regard to empowering and informing women of the most effective choices to make in the ASM sector. Transformation in such communities would mean evolving into SSE. Thus, developing an ASM based on principles of SSE means transforming poor women, who often dominate the ASM in the form of organised groups such as the Association of Women Miners.

Also, employing SSE as a model of driving ASM means increasing women's access to organisational assets. The concept of SSE is increasingly used to refer to organisations and enterprises engaged in the production and exchange of goods and services, which are autonomous from the state and guided by objectives and norms that prioritise social well-being, cooperation and solidarity. They include, for example, cooperatives and other social enterprises, mutual associations, women's self-help groups, unions of informal economy workers, fair trade networks and solidarity finance schemes.

Finally, important tenets of SSE that resonate with the urge to address several of today's major development challenges will help ASM embrace ideals of inclusiveness, find a holistic approach to development and address the broader post-2015 challenges of (i) better integration of economic, social and environmental objectives; (ii) poverty reduction, decent work, gender equality and equitable development; (iii) addressing the structural causes of global crises linked to finance, food and energy; and (iv) building up resilience for coping with crises and external shocks.

No conclusion – rather a question

In this article, I have attempted to liken the social challenges facing the mining sector to the proverbial 'dry valley'. I noted that the Mbale mining community lacked strategic thinking and therefore failed to secure the future of the mining enterprise, while the grand Inga Dam project is a total failure, despite the existence of a 'grand strategy'. I have thus suggested rethinking existing models through the lens of SSE and debated whether such an approach could be a game changer in transforming the 'dry valley'

into one of hope. I have argued before that this transformation process cannot be achieved unless a 'strategy' is developed that is based on the principles of 'thought leadership' (Onditi, 2018). I am not the first to advise leaders on the continent on the way forward – eminent African scholars such as Gumede (2015) and Mazrui (2005) writing on the subject of pan-Africanism have provided thoughts on how 'Africa' can achieve its potential through local solutions. These authors emphasize that the African transformation initiative must be anchored on three aspects: 'thought leadership', 'thought liberation' and 'critical consciousness'. The question remains, however: are the political elites and bureaucrats aware of these critical foundations that could enrich policy praxes? ■

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