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Dispossession, exploitation or employment? Youth livelihoods and extractive industry investment in Sierra Leone

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ABSTRACT

The impacts that increased transnational extractive industry investments are having on local populations in natural resource-rich regions of sub-Saharan Africa are diverse, far-reaching and complex. A surge of recent investment has been variously met by resistance and rejection, by acquiescence combined with demands for better labour conditions, and outright acceptance in anticipation of gainful employment. Drawing on recent field-based research carried out in diamondiferous Kono District in Sierra Leone, this paper critically explores these contrasting responses to mining activities, by focusing on how youth perceive and respond to extractive industry expansion. The analysis is particularly salient in the case of Sierra Leone, as Kono's prime alluvial diamond areas are becoming 'mined out', and artisanal and small-scale operations are being replaced by more capital intensive modes of mechanized extraction. In an environment where the demand for unskilled labour is diminishing, and young people are facing pressing livelihood needs in an employment-constrained economy, youth are playing important roles in rights-based mobilizations around mining. The paper aims to broaden understanding of youth perceptions of mining investment, and illuminate the various factors underlying a diverse range of responses to the expansion of extractive industries. It concludes by reflecting on how youth perceptions of extractive industry expansion may also be influencing the ways in which mining companies understand and fashion their business and social responsibility strategies.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, soaring global commodity prices and heightened demands for natural resources from the world's emerging economies have led to significant growth in extractive industry investment across sub-Saharan Africa [1]. However, as many natural resource-rich African countries have become increasingly reliant on the export of mineral resources, paradoxically, the very localities where mining takes place are often among the poorest and most economically depressed. In such communities, evidence suggests that youth – understood here as a social category defined by a combination of age, social status and relative livelihood dependence – are in particularly disadvantaged positions. Indeed, even in areas of abundant natural resource wealth, young people often lack access to land, credit, employment opportunities, and other assets. While youth may have pressing livelihood needs, a surge of investment in mining and hydrocarbon projects across Africa has triggered a variety of responses amongst young people – ranging from outright rejection, to protest over labour conditions, to acceptance in anticipation of gainful employment. Whether youth perceive resource extraction as a

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process of exploitation or opportunity largely depends on how this encounter is constructed by a range of social actors, and which constructions come to dominate how different actors experience and make sense of extraction.

Focusing on the case of Sierra Leone, this paper critically explores contrasting youth perceptions of, and responses to, extractive industry expansion. In Sierra Leone, youth challenges are critical given that 79 per cent of the population is under the age of 35 years, and 75 per cent of those under 30 are unemployed [2]. Moreover, concerns for youth livelihoods and youth empowerment are particularly salient, given that the country's civil war of the 1990s is often linked to an underlying 'crisis of youth' which, it is argued, prompted large numbers of socially marginalized young people to embrace conflict in a desperate search for empowerment [3,4]. In the post-war period, youth issues have increasingly commanded international donor and NGO attention, returning to centre stage on policy agendas and featuring prominently in the community development strategies that many extractive companies are currently pursuing.

In this context, the objectives of this paper are twofold: first, drawing upon the concepts of 'accumulation by exploitation' and 'accumulation by dispossession' (after [5]), it seeks to illustrate how changing global-economic patterns and processes associated with extractive industry investment in Africa are opening up 'new fields for capital accumulation' [6: 153], while simultaneously radically reshaping livelihood opportunities for young people in resource-rich communities; and second, it aims to understand how youth perceptions of, and responses to, extractive industry expansion may be influencing the ways in which mining companies understand and fashion their business and social responsibility strategies. Drawing upon field-based research carried out in Sierra Leone's diamondiferous Kono District, where there has been a recent proliferation of foreign interest in mineral extraction, the paper critically explores heterogeneity within the social category of youth, and its relationship to social activism, mining and livelihoods. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews were carried out with different groupings of youth based upon similarity and difference (e.g. students, rural youth working in mining and those not, and by gender and ethnicity). These were complemented by in-depth semi-structured interviews with mining company officials to understand how, if at all, corporate practices and strategies were being shaped by youth issues. For young people in Kono District, it was apparent that the underlying agendas and motivations for engaging with mining companies varied considerably between different subgroupings of youth, as did the responses of companies to these different voices.

Following this introduction, the first section of the paper contextualizes the wider global political economy that is shaping the on-going and rapid expansion of extractive industry investments in sub-Saharan Africa. More specifically, the tenets of neoliberalism are briefly reviewed and some of its associated social and environmental impacts are explored, as indigenous populations are displaced and key livelihood resources, such as land, minerals and water, are appropriated during the process of accumulation. This discussion sets the stage for section two, which locates Sierra Leone within this process. Here, youth perceptions of mining investment are explored to illuminate the factors underlying a diversity of responses to the expansion of extractive industries. This analysis follows on to section three, which reflects upon how youth responses to extractive industry expansion may be influencing the ways in which mining companies understand and fashion their business and social responsibility strategies. Ultimately, as is suggested in the conclusion, a better understanding of how diverse interpretations of 'sustainability' become shaped by conflicting interests and underlying agendas remains critical for ensuring that young people in Sierra Leone become included in development processes that have for so long been dominated by powerful actors.

2. The extractive industries and neoliberalism in Africa

In Marx's original critique of capitalism in Europe during the eighteenth century, the notion of 'primitive accumulation' was used to describe the process whereby labour became commoditised and a proletariat class was created to serve the interests – and accumulate wealth – for a bourgeoisie class, who owned the means of production. While Marx was mainly concerned with transformations taking place in Europe, and in fact wrote very little about what we now refer to as the developing world, he did describe the exploitation of mineral wealth by the Spanish in the New World as a classic example of primitive accumulation [7]. It was not until much later in the 1960s, that emerging neo-Marxist concerns for underdevelopment in newly independent Third World countries drew on Marx's theory of primitive accumulation, which then paved the way for a long tradition of scholarship that explored the unequal relationships between 'core' and 'periphery' in the context of natural resource extraction [8–10]. In more recent years, these concerns have once again returned to centre stage, largely in response to increasingly asymmetrical power relationships between global extractive industry corporations and weak peripheral nation-states [11].

In particular, building on the original tenets of Marxist thought, Harvey's [5] concepts of 'accumulation by exploitation' and 'accumulation by dispossession' have been employed by a number of critical scholars concerned with the extractive industries and development, to broaden understanding of the uneven nature of global capitalism and its unequal benefits in poor countries in the global south [12,13]. While the first form of accumulation has historically been concerned with labour exploitation and unequal relations of production, the second has addressed the appropriation of key livelihood resources, such as land, minerals and water. However, while Harvey [5] presents these two forms of accumulation as phenomena with a real existence based on how value is transferred to owners of capital, they might also be considered as social constructions of the various actors involved. That is, whether resource extraction is perceived as a process of 'exploitation', 'dispossession' or 'opportunity enhancement' depends largely on how this encounter is constructed by a range of social actors, and which constructions come to dominate how different actors experience and make sense of extraction.

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