Farming miners' or 'mining farmers'?: Diamond mining and rural development in post-conflict Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Sierra Leone is currently emerging from a brutal civil war that lasted most of the 1990s, and now has the dubious distinction of being ranked among the world's poorest countries. As thousands of displaced people move back to their villages, a large proportion of the predominantly farm-based rural population are growing food crops for the first time in a decade. Alluvial diamond mining makes an important contribution to the national economy, though some would argue that Sierra Leone's diamonds are a 'resource curse'. Drawing upon research undertaken in the 1970s and also in the post-conflict period, the paper provides a longitudinal perspective on the complex links between the farming and mining sectors. Recent field research in Sierra Leone's Eastern Province, indicates that many links between farming and diamond mining have actually been maintained despite severe dislocation. These links could play a key role in rejuvenating market-oriented food production, providing the much-needed impetus for post-war rural development. In charting a future development trajectory, the paper recognizes the urgent need for an effective management scheme for both mining and marketing diamonds, given the potentially destabilizing effect on the country of the uncontrolled exploitation of this valuable resource. In this context, a recent community-based, integrated management initiative adopted by one local NGO, the Peace Diamond Alliance, is examined. If meaningful rural development is to be achieved among desperately poor communities, development strategies must be based on a detailed understanding of the nature of inter-locking livelihoods in the agricultural and mining sectors.

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