Government’s ban on Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining, youth livelihoods and imagined futures in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) represents a vibrant sector that provides direct employment and income to many people particularly the youth. In Ghana, concerns about ASM related environmental challenges led the Ghana Media Coalition Against Galamsey to start the #StopGalamseyNow Campaign. This resulted in enormous pressure on the government to impose a ban on ASM in 2017. Drawing on data from interviews conducted with fifty-eight ASM workers in two mining districts in Ghana, this paper examines the effects of the ban on the livelihoods and imagined futures of young miners who were previously engaged in the sector and the ways they navigate their uncertain futures. What emerges strongly from our interviews with young people from a variety of backgrounds and experiences is that, while ASM is a key sector that allows young people to build their livelihoods (earn income, accumulate assets), the ban has fundamentally re-structured the landscape of opportunities, leading to both social and economic consequences for young people. The ban had meant that young people could not imagine a future of new beginnings and possibilities for improved life chances including continuing to accumulate asset, invest in residential plots and buildings, or finance the cost of migration of children abroad. Mobility and exploitation of ‘near and distant opportunity spaces’ through the support of social relations enable young people cope with hardships brought by the ban. These findings have important implications for policies seeking to promote youth employment in Africa.

1. Introduction

Africa has the fastest growing population in the world, with a large share of the population falling within the youth category (i.e. 15-35 years). In stark contrast to the situation in North America and Europe which have rapidly ageing populations, the youth population of Africa is expected to increase from 226 million in 2015 to 830 million by 2050 (African Development Bank, 2016; ILO, 2019). These young people from diverse backgrounds, face similar realities of rising unemployment and job creation is fundamental to the realisation of their shared prosperity and poverty reduction (Filmer and Fox, 2014). It is estimated that about 20 million jobs need to be created annually until 2035 to accommodate the growing workforce (Abdychev et al., 2018). Although around 10 to 12 million African youth join the labour force every year, the continent is only able to create 3.7 million new jobs each year (African Development Bank, 2016). This represents a worrying situation for African economies as they strive to work towards achieving the 2030 Agenda of ‘leaving no one behind’. The employment challenge in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), is not just about creating decent employment in the formal sector—it is important as that may be—but also of expanding the opportunity sets for productive and gainful employment in the informal non-farm sectors (e.g. ASM activities) (Hilson and Osei, 2014; Yeboah and Jayne, 2018).

There is recognition in both research and policy discourse that Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM) —mostly informal, low-tech, and risky form of mining—can provide employment and enable young people build their livelihoods (Hilson and Osei, 2014). As a vibrant branch of the informal sector, ASM provides direct and indirect employment to nearly 10 million people in SSA (Hilson et al., 2013). In Ghana, nearly one million people are directly employed in the ASM sector (Bansah et al., 2018). ASM generates income for many people and is seen as having the potential to facilitate sustainable rural livelihoods.

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1 This is known locally as galamsey in Ghana.
and poverty reduction (Labonne, 2014).

While statistics on the participation of different social groups in the ASM sector are hard to come by, anecdotal evidence suggests that young people between the ages of 15–35 years may be over-represented. Hilson and Osei (2014) confirm youth’s participation in ASM in Ghana and suggest that it is a stopgap for young people in their search for alternative employment opportunities. In addition to the direct and indirect employment it offers, ASM contributes to the generation of foreign exchange, fuels local commerce, provides raw materials for local goldsmiths and further contributes 31% of the total gold produced (Bansah et al., 2018).

In line with the huge economic benefits and poverty reduction potential of ASM, Zvarivadza and Nhleko (2018) argued for governments to institutionalise policy frameworks to minimise the safety, health and environmental risks associated with the sector. It is in the spirit of this significant economic potential of the ASM sector that led the Government of Ghana (GoG) to move to regularise the activities of miners in the sector following the implementation of the Small-Scale Gold Mining Law in 1989 (Hilson, 2002). The formalisation process was also geared towards ensuring responsible and safe mining (Bansah, 2019).

Nevertheless, closely associated with ASM activities in Ghana are severe environmental challenges such as mercury and water pollution, land degradation, deforestation, as well as unsafe mining practices, conflict, social and human rights abuses (Edufu et al., 2020; Zolnikov, 2020). Mercury, a toxic substance used in ASM operations to extract gold, is reported to have found its way, mainly through poor handling in rivers, contributing to water pollution; and the influx of foreign nationals, who notably deploy the ‘chang fa' machine in their operations led to rapid degradation of lands, forests and water bodies (Hilson et al., 2013; Bansah et al., 2018).

The negative environmental impacts of ASM activities inspired negative perceptions within popular and policymaking circles (Hilson and Maconachie, 2020). The dominant orthodoxy has been that ASM is ‘bad’ for society and youth miners are ‘criminals’ who have little or no regard for the dangers posed to the natural environment (Hilson, 2017; Tuokuu et al., 2020).

Informing these negative perceptions, governments over the years have instituted policies and measures to ban and clamp down on the activities of ASM operators. For instance, in 2006, Ghana’s Ministry of National Security under former president Kufuor’s Administration initiated the ‘Stop Illegal Mining’ or ‘Operation Flush-Out’ (i.e. a military-led campaign to stop the activities of ASM operators on mining concessions). The Operation Flush-Out led to the destruction of mining equipment and processing plants of ASM operators (Okoh and Hilson, 2011; Tschakert, 2009). Similarly, in 2013, the former president, John Dramani Mahama, formed the Inter-Ministerial Task Force on Illegal Small-Scale Mining with the objective of forcefully ‘flushing out’ illegal ASM operators in the country (Hilson et al., 2014; Hilson and Maconachie, 2020). The use of military force to flush out ASM operators was not sustainable and practicable because of the economic significance of ASM (i.e. employment and income-earning potentials) especially for the youth (Hilson and Maconachie, 2020). This made the government to soften its stance on the use of military force on ASM operators.2

The laxity in the enforcement of laws to regulate the ASM sector coupled with the softening of the government’s position on the militarisation of the ASM sector have made the activities of ASM operators flourish in recent years (Hilson et al., 2014; Tuokuu et al., 2020; Edufu et al., 2020). However, this is happening at the same time as there is mounting concerns about the negative effects of the activities of ASM operators on the environment. In fact, in March 2017, the Ghana Water Company Limited expressed grave concerns about how the activities of ASM operators has led to deteriorations in water quality and warned that if nothing was done about the situation, Ghana will be importing consumption water from neighbouring countries by 2020 (Edufu et al., 2020). Informed by the perceived threats of ASM activities on the environment, in April 2017, CitiFM (an Accra-based radio station) together with the Ghana Media Coalition Against Galamsey launched the ‘#StopGalamseyNow Campaign’ to put pressure on the GoG to save the environment (land and water bodies). For Hilson (2017), Hilson and Maconachie (2020), the campaign against ASM galvanised support from a wider section of Ghanaian society including politicians and civil society organisations (e.g. non-governmental organisations (NGOs), media, faith-based organisations and think tanks).

Faced with pressures from the citizenry, the GoG acted swiftly to place a ban on all ASM activities both legal and illegal in April 2017 (Armah-Attoh, 2017). The ban brought in its wake Operation Vanguard (a special taskforce comprising the Police and Army) to clamp down on the activities of ASM operators. In the early stages of the ban, about 4000 military personnel were tasked to visit all galamsey sites across the country, reaffirming the point that ASM activities have been banned, and there were reports that severe punishments such as fines and imprisonment were meted out to offenders (Hilson, 2017; Edufu et al., 2020).

An obvious and immediate consequence of the ban is that approximately one million persons, who were engaged in the sector lost their jobs and income sources (Zolnikov, 2020). A small number of studies have examined how the ban has affected the livelihoods of young people who were previously engaged in the sector, and the coping strategies they employed (Bansah, 2019; Zolnikov, 2020; Tuokuu et al., 2020) although there is little research that explores how the imposition of the ban and subsequent destruction to livelihoods has impacted on the futures that these youth imagine for themselves. Against this backdrop, this article seeks to address this knowledge gap by answering the following research questions: How has the ban of ASM affected the livelihoods and imagined futures of youth engaged in ASM activities? In what specific ways do young people who engaged in ASM navigate the hardship brought on them by the ban?

We answer these questions by drawing on a qualitative research study undertaken in the Bibiani Anhwiaso Bekwai Municipality in the Western North Region and Abuakwa South Municipality in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Using a qualitative research design, fifty-eight young people from four communities (i.e. Bibiani Old Town, Donkotor-Lineso, Aweniase and Afiesa) within the two municipalities were interviewed with a particular focus on how they came to engage in the ASM sector, their perceptions of and the ways the ban on ASM activities has affected their lives, livelihoods and future plans, and the coping strategies employed.

What emerges strongly from this study is that ASM is a key livelihood activity that enabled young people to earn income, take care of their own economic and social needs, and support the welfare of family members. There is also evidence that engagement in the sector allowed young people to accumulate assets in the form of residential plots and housing. However, the introduction of the ban has rendered young people unemployed, destructing their efforts to build livelihoods. We also find evidence that it led in some instances to the engagement of some young people in risky behaviour, and the breakdown of family relations following their inability to meet their own or their family needs as well as their inability to pursue different imagined projects (e.g. continue to accumulate asset, invest in residential plots and buildings, and finance education of children). Family and broader social relations,

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2 A Chinese-made diesel-powered rock crusher used for crushing excavated auriferous deposits.
3 We acknowledge that existing studies have documented how attempts by governments to ban and use military force in the ASM sector has impacted negatively on the livelihoods of the youth (see for example, Tuokuu et al., 2020; Hilson, 2017; Hilson and Maconachie, 2020). However, while these studies offer some useful insights, they fail to address how bans and militarisation of the ASM sector affect the imagined futures of the youth and the livelihood strategies employed by the youth in navigating the hardships brought by the ban on their livelihoods.
together with their mobility has enabled them cope with challenges faced.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: the next section presents the concept of ‘opportunity space’ as the framework for understanding the opportunities and constraints to young peoples’ livelihood-building efforts. This is followed by a description of the study sites and research methods used. The focus then turns to the findings—background and motivations for entering ASM; effects of the ban on youth livelihoods and imagined futures; and coping strategies employed. This is followed by a discussion and concludes with some identified implications for policy.

2. Young people and livelihood building: an opportunity space framework

Our analysis of how the government’s ban on ASM in Ghana is affecting youth livelihoods and imagined futures, and the ways young people navigate the situation draws on the concept of ‘opportunity space’ introduced by Sumberg et al. (2014). There is copious body of research literature on the notion of ‘opportunity’ from a variety of academic disciplines including education, social geography, innovation, entrepreneurship, business strategy and philosophy (Gough and Langevang, 2017; Afutu-Kotey et al., 2017). Nevertheless, relatively little of this literature focuses exclusively on rural young people in the Global South (see for example, Sumberg et al., 2020). The notion of opportunity space refers to the spatio-temporal distribution of a range of economic opportunities which young people may exploit to build their livelihoods in their transition to independent adult life (Sumberg et al., 2014). Sumberg et al. (2014) viewed opportunity space as encompassing both ‘near’ and ‘distant’ opportunity spaces. While near opportunity spaces comprise employment options that are open to young people within their immediate vicinity where they mostly reside, distant opportunity spaces are the opportunities open to young people beyond their immediate environment (i.e. including those found in other rural and urban enclaves), and the ability of a young person to take advantage of such opportunities may require relocation or mobility (Sumberg et al., 2020; IFAD, 2019). As Sumberg et al. (2014:10) argue, “a willingness and ability to travel and live away from home are necessary in order to exploit the distant opportunity space”. The notion of ‘near and distant opportunity spaces’ has strong conceptual linkage with the literature on rural economic opportunity which spans both on-and off-farm livelihood activities (Abay et al., 2020). In a sense, this suggests the need to extend the frame of analysis beyond the farm, household or immediate vicinity to encompass the wider local, regional or national economies. Abay et al. (2020) argue that opportunity emerges mainly through the interplay of off-farm, farm and other economic activities. The dynamics of this interplay is an important component of the literature on livelihood diversification, as well as the non-farm rural economy and linkages (Ellis, 2000).

Whether near or distant opportunities, a range of factors mediate the landscape of opportunities open to young people. An important point here is that the opportunities that are open to young people are cumulatively structured (See Sumberg et al., 2020; IFAD, 2019; Roberts, 1995). Owing to this structuring, Roberts (2009) argued that it was erroneous to over-emphasise the role of choices and aspirations in determining how young people build livelihoods or seek opportunities in the labour market. Indeed, as Roberts puts it more starkly, “neither school leavers nor adults typically choose their jobs in any meaningful sense: they simply take what is available” (Roberts, 1977: p.3). A range of factors including the characteristics of a location (e.g. proximity to markets, natural resource potential which shape the viability of economic activities, government policies and interventions including the actions or inactions of the state, and factors at more socio-individual levels (i.e. social norms related to gender, age, class, and individual background and preferences, including personal interests and aspirations) as well as social relations and networks mediate the landscape of opportunity (see Roberts, 1977; 2009; IFAD, 2019; Sumberg et al., 2020). These factors, which Roberts (2009) refers to as ‘opportunity structures’, “create distinct routes that govern young peoples’ entry into the labour market, career progress and the futures that they imagine for themselves” (p.332). In essence, ‘opportunity structures’ help frame the appropriateness of economic activities in a given context (Sumberg et al., 2014).

It is important to acknowledge that the reading of a given opportunity by a young person may differ significantly from others (friends, siblings, neighbours), and is likely to be shaped by issues of preference, experience, and familiarity with an economic activity. The reading of a landscape is what can transform a possibility (an activity that is possible within a landscape) into an opportunity (a possible activity that is seen as suitable, of interest/desirable) (IFAD, 2019; Sumberg et al., 2020).

As it will become clear in our analysis and discussions, while some factors allow young people to take advantage of opportunities, many of the factors such as government’s actions to ban ASM activities can fundamentally alter the landscape of opportunities and thereby limit or constraining the choices and ability of young people to build a livelihood and pursue their imagined futures. In this regard, the use of the ‘opportunity space’ framework is appropriate for understanding how the ban has affected the livelihoods and imagined futures of young people and the strategies they have employed to ensure their survival. In doing so, this paper seeks to test the applicability of the ‘opportunities spaces’ framework in the context of the ASM sector in Ghana. The adoption of the framework offers new perspectives into understanding the livelihood dynamics and imagined futures of young people engaged in ASM activities.

3. Study area and methods

3.1. Study area

This study was undertaken in four mining communities in the Bibiani Ahnwiasso-Bekwai Municipality (BABM) and Abua-Kwa South Municipal Assembly (ASMA) in the Western North Region and Eastern Region of Ghana respectively. The specific communities were Bibiani Old Town and Donkoto-Linseo in BABM and Ahwensea and Afiesa in ASMA (see Fig. 1). These sites were chosen because they represent some of the historically important gold mining sites in Ghana.

Gold mining in BABM dates to 1891 and the municipality hosts some large mining companies such as Noble Gold Bibiani Limited and Chirano Gold Mines Limited (Opoku-Antwi, 2010). Owusu-Nimo et al. (2018) found a high number of sightings and active involvement of youth in ASM activities in Bibiani Old Town and Donkoto-Linseo (see Fig. 1). ASM activities in the municipality mostly take place in abandoned underground shafts or tunnels which have been ceded to the ASM miners, manual selection from large-scale mines (i.e. pilfering mining), and the use of manual pits (Owusu-Nimo et al., 2018).

In 2008, the GoG supported ASM miners in Bibiani with a loan facility of GHe2.2 million to extend electricity to their operating sites in Donkoto-Linseo (Oppong, 2008). There is a youth-led ASM group called the ‘Ekomeyaa’ Cooperative that employs many young people as well as the Small-Scale Mining Centre in Bibiani that provides support services to ASM miners (Owusu-Nimo et al., 2018). The youth population of the area is estimated to be 40 percent of the total population, and of this, many depend on ASM activities for their survival (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014a). ASM activities sustain the employment of the youth and therefore the government’s ban is likely to have some effects on their livelihoods. However, we acknowledge that while ASM activities serve as the dominant form of employment for the youth, there are other economic activities in the agricultural (e.g. farming, trading of agriculture inputs and products), industrial (e.g. quarrying, construction, repair of motor cycles and vehicles) and the services sectors (e.g. barbering, hairdressing, accommodation, food service activities and transportation and storage) that constitute ‘near opportunity spaces’ for...
Fig. 1. Map of the study areas. Source: Authors' construct using ArcGIS 10.6.
the youth in BABM (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014a).

Like BABM, ASM has a historical presence of mining activities which has led to the operation of large mining companies such as Kibi Goldfields, Extra Gold and Managing Gold Resource in the Municipality. However, the activities of small-scale miners in communities such as Kibi, Afiesa, Ahwenese and Apamap dominates the mining sector in the Municipality (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014b). While agriculture accounts for 65% of all employment, the unprofitability and unattractiveness of farming is forcing many inhabitants (especially young people) to seek employment in the ASM sector (Eduful et al., 2020).

What is worth noting is that mining communities within ASM are located along the tributaries of the River Densu, and this raises concerns about potential negative effects of ASM activities on the river and human survival (Eduful et al., 2020). In the Municipality, the ASM sector serves as a source of an economically viable occupation especially for the youth and therefore the ban is likely to have an effect on their lives, and many may have had to develop complex responses to survive. Again, while agriculture and ASM activities constitute important economic activities, there are other ‘near opportunity spaces’ in the services (e.g. food service activities, wholesale and retail, transportation) and industry sector (e.g. manufacturing, construction, air conditioning supply) for the youth in the Municipality (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014b).

3.2. Research design and data collection

This study employed a qualitative research design involving semi-structured interviews with fifty-eight young people distributed across the four communities in the two municipalities. Data collection for this study took place between December 2018 and March 2020 and involved two distinct phases of data collection. The first phase took place in Bibiani Old Town and Donkoto-Lineso between December 2018 and March 2019 where we interviewed twenty-seven youth (17 males and 10 females) previously engaged in ASM activities. Purposive sampling and snowballing were employed in selecting the youth in the two communities. The rationale for the use of purposive sampling was that we were interested in understanding the perspectives of young people who were previously engaged in ASM but had to disengage their activities as a result of the ban introduced by the government. Through purposive sampling, five young people were first identified and interviewed. The five interviewees subsequently helped us to locate additional 22 interviewees for their participation in the study.

A semi-structured interview guide was employed in soliciting the perspectives of interviewees. The use of in-depth semi-structured interviews allowed us to gain deeper insights into the perspectives of the youth on their engagement in ASM. The interviews sought to understand the perspectives of the youth on their motivations for engaging in ASM, the implications of the ban on their livelihoods and futures, and the coping strategies employed to survive or restart an alternative livelihood amidst the ban on ASM.

At the start of every interview, interviewees were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and they were free to opt-out anytime they wanted. The idea of participation being voluntary was iterated through the research process. This also helped avoid the possibility of data gathering from participants being extractive. Interviewees were also assured of their confidentiality and anonymity during the interview process. Moreover, given that one of the authors is a native of Bibiani Old Town, he had established relationships and built rapport with the interviewees which also provided opportunities for participants to freely express their views without any fear. A high degree of flexibility was also exercised during the interview process. The majority of interviews for phase one were conducted in the local language. The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and were tape-recorded with full informed consent, and were later translated into English.

For phase two, data collection took place between February and March 2020 and involved 31 interviewees comprising of 10 females and 21 males from the Ahwenese and Afiesa communities in the Abuaakwa South Municipality. Interviewees, mainly young people were purposively selected to ascertain the impact of the ban on their livelihoods and imagined futures, and coping strategies employed. As part of the sampling process, 10 interviewees were first identified by the researchers with the help of locals in the communities. These interviewees then introduced the researchers to 21 other interviewees who expressed their willingness and availability to participate in the study. The purpose of the research was clearly explained to the interviewees who then consented verbally to their participation in the study.

The same interview schedule and protocol employed in phase one was used in phase two to elicit data on the motivations of the youth for engaging in ASM, their perspectives on the ban and its implications on their livelihoods as well as the coping and adaptation strategies employed. All interviews with participants in Ahwenese and Afiesa were conducted in the local language and tape-recorded with their full informed consent. These were translated into English language. The interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes.

3.3. Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed and verified against the recorded audio files and field notes to ensure data accuracy. The interviews were then coded into main (parent nodes) and sub themes (child nodes) by using NVivo 12. As part of the analysis, three main themes (i.e. background and motivations for entering ASM sector, impact of the ban on ASM on youth livelihoods and imagined futures, and coping strategies) were developed during the first coding process. As part of the second coding process, 6 broad child nodes were also developed as sub-categories. The coding process was recursive in nature and involved movements back and forth with the data and the emerging themes. For this reason, the analysis followed an inductive and iterative method of thematic analysis which focuses on familiarisation with the data, the generation of initial themes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As mentioned earlier, given that interviewees were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity, their names have been anonymised in the final analysis. We also exercised a great deal of reflexivity as the data collection process was moulded by researchers’ social identities that might have influenced the data collection and analysis. The validity and credibility of the findings were established using multiple sources of evidence from interviewees, peer debriefing and researchers’ reflexivity which helped in avoiding biases and pre-conceptions during data analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Background and motivations for entering ASM sector

While not necessarily representative of the broader population of young people, the interviewees were selected purposively to capture key markers of social difference present among the youth population engaged in the sector, including gender. At the time of the field research, many of the young people in the four communities had been engaged in ASM activities between three to fourteen years. In addition, interviewees reported that they had previously worked in the ASM sector in different communities including Kenyase, Woronso, Nzema, Nkaseem, Mansokran, Wassa, Agyankaman, Konongo and Obuasi. Interestingly while both municipalities and all the sites appear to have strong farming potential, it emerged from our interviews that ASM is the only major economic activity in which young people engaged in although a few individuals mentioned farming. For instance, one interviewee stated that: “I was only into galamsey. I have no other job besides galamsey.” (Interview, 14th December 2020, Bibiani Old Town). Even for those who combined ASM with farming, they were not directly involved in the farm work in terms of their labour contribution. Rather they relied on hiring labour for the farm work as explained by one interviewee:
“I had a farm that was being handled by someone else [ … ]; when the gold business came, I took my eyes off the farm. So, if you have a farm, you have to hand over to someone to supervise for you” (Interview, 14th February 2020, Afiesa).

Across all the sites, interviewees linked their motivation or entry into ASM sector with their inability to complete or attain higher formal education. This experience left many with no option than to venture into ASM as a means to survive as explained in the following quotations:

“I was young when I started. Because I come from a poor background, I decided to do this [galamsey] to make some money to further my education but I still couldn’t go back to school after JHS” (Interview, 15th January 2019, Donkoto-Lineso).

Interviewees narrated governments’ failure to create jobs for the youth and how it has become increasingly difficult to secure formal sector employment in Ghana despite having a Secondary School certificate, and this experience compelled them to seek employment in ASM sector: “I have completed the school qualification; as they say ‘I have the key’. But, the system in Ghana is such that you must know someone before you can get something. Who will lead you to get the work for you?” (Interview, 15th February 2020, Afiesa). This sentiment was also shared by another interviewee in Bibiani who argued that: “after Junior High School, I realised life was tough so I needed to find a job or make money and it was galamsey that could fetch me money [ … ]” (Interview, 4th January 2019, Bibiani Old Town).

For many male and female interviewees, desires to earn ‘quick money’ to take care of their own needs and that of their children and other family members influenced their decision to engage in ASM. In all the sites, females reported working as employees for a wage, most notably in fetching water, carrying sand and running errands for their employers. Males worked in the physically demanding activities such as cracking rocks, grading and digging.

A majority of interviewees expressed a sense of contentment in relation to being able to earn independent income from ASM, accumulate some asset/wealth, and further support their family members. For instance, an interviewee explained that: “I was at first living in the same house with my parents. But because of galamsey, I was able to get money to build a single room where I could live [ … ] I also know of people who have bought taxis and buildings from galamsey” (Interview, 4th February 2020, Ahwenease). Speaking about the benefits of galamsey, another interviewee emphasised: “it improved my standard of living because you could get money to cater for yourself and family. It also helped me to support my children in education to reach a higher level. Some also travelled outside the country. I built four houses with money from galamsey” (Interview, 15th February 2020, Afiesa).

The ability to accumulate wealth, especially investment in housing with earnings from ASM is significant and may come with the societal respect necessary for transitioning to adult life. Nevertheless, these outcomes were not universally shared. Across the four communities, a few interviewees, particularly those who had not worked for a long period prior to the imposition of the ban stated that, while they had plans to engage in different projects (such as buy a piece of land, build a house, support family members and children’s education), they had yet to accumulate the necessary resources to implement these plans.

4.2. Implications of the ban on ASM on youth livelihoods and imagined futures

4.2.1. Young peoples’ perception of the ban

Across the four sites, young people expressed mixed reactions in relation to the ban on ASM. First, a small number of interviewees felt that government action to place a ban on ASM activities was a step in the right direction. They averred that ASM directly contributes to the destruction of farmlands, water and forest resources and this necessitated the need for the ban. For them, the ban has led to a somewhat reduction in water pollution and destruction of farmlands as one interviewee puts it:

“We dig pits without covering them. The southern part of the Birim River was also destroyed by galamsey. To an extent, we were worried the government’s ban was destroying our work, but on second thoughts, we also found faults in our activities especially our impact on the environment” (Interview, 13th February 2020, Afiesa).

On the other hand, many young people disagreed with the decision of government to place a ban on ASM. Their view is rooted in the belief that their engagement in ASM had little or no impact on farmlands, forest or water bodies. They claimed to have been environmentally prudent with their activities because their mining involves going underground in search of gold. They accused foreigners, particularly Chinese small-scale miners, as those who were destroying the farmlands and water bodies, particularly through the use of the ‘chang fa’ machine as stated by a male interviewee:

“The machine the Chinese were using brought about this ban. As for what we do, we do not destroy any land or water. Our work is underground. The President should do something about it because before the Chinese came, we were already into galamsey. They were the destroyers of our water bodies. The President should find a way to separate us from them because even us, we were not in support of what they [the Chinese] were doing’’ (Interview, 15th March 2020, Bibiani Old Town).

The deployment of Operation Vanguard appears to have had negative consequences for some young people in all the four communities studied. Interviewees provided numerous examples of how young people who still frequented galamsey sites encountered physical assaults, harassment and arrest by the task force. One interviewee lamented that:

“It hurts a lot because these people were using their strength to work; you know with this job; you can get hurt and even die. So, if one decides to work and not be an armed robber and you arrest and molest the person … When they arrest you, they can even ask you to look at the sun and if you don’t, they beat you up. As for the operation vanguard team, they really disturbed us’’ (Interview, 5th February 2019, Bibiani Old Town).

The experience of harassment and assaults by Operation Vanguard was not limited to the male miners but also affected young women vendors working on mining sites. In fact, to varying degrees these mining sites served as markets for the exchange of goods and services and therefore became a target for the Operation Vanguard:

“At the mining site, sometimes we are about 300 people and that is why there is market for different commodities. So even if you sell food and they [Operation Vanguard] come to meet you on site, they will beat you. The soldiers can even throw your food into the pit. They argue that we the vendors are the ones who give food to the miners to get energy to work” (Interview, 15th February 2020, Afiesa).

4.3. Ban on ASM and youth livelihoods

Despite interviewees’ mixed views on the ban, what appears unquestionably clear from the interviews is that the ban on ASM has fundamentally re-structured the landscape of opportunities for the youth. All the interviewees said that the ban has deprived them of their livelihoods. They have suddenly become unemployed with no job or income source. For many it is a shock not to see money daily, weekly or even monthly as before the ban. Consequently, the ban appears to have brought untold financial hardships, given that ASM is the preferred activity through which young people are able to make money to take care of their socio-economic needs, and those of their children and
family members:

“The President didn’t help us at all. He needs to lift the ban so we can go back to work. Otherwise, we are dying. As we speak now, I don’t have a penny to buy water to drink. Galamsey was our only source of income” (Interview, 13th February 2019, Bibiani Old Town).

Our data also provides evidence to show that the ban has had wider effects on the local economies of the municipalities. Trading and food vending, most notably operated by young women appear to have been severely hit:

“During the time of galamsey, there was employment in this town. Anything you carry out to sell will be bought. But with the imposition of the ban, we have become miserable. Now when you put items for sale, they don’t even buy and those who buy also refuse to pay because they don’t have money” (Interview, 15th February 2020, Afiesa).

Interviewees further explained the ban has as well resulted in an increase in youth idleness. This is how one interviewee described it:

“At first you wouldn’t see the young men in town during the day. But now we are all over there since we don’t have any work to do. The ban on galamsey prevents us from working and has created financial problems. So, we’re just idle thinking about ourselves and looking up to the government” (Interview, 10th February 2020, Ahwenease).

There was consensus among interviewees in all the four communities that the financial hardship brought by the ban on galamsey had led to changes in social and family relations. One interviewee shared his experience by saying: “the truth is that the ban is leading to divorce because we don’t have jobs […] Due to the hardship from the ban on galamsey, my wife has divorced me” (Interview, January 25, 2019, Bibiani Old Town). Still on the social front, interviewees reported a rise in the rate of local petty crime due in part to idleness which pushes young people to engage in such acts:

“The ban has also increased the crime rate in the community. Last week, there were 15 attacks in a single day. There are a lot of cases of stealing in this town now. But it was not so when there was galamsey because people were getting money and all the time, their attention was on the mining” (Interview, 16th February 2020, Afiesa).

4.4. What about the imagined futures of young people?

It is evident from our interviews that young people had divergent plans for the future whether to set up new economic ventures (such as grocery and spare parts shops), continue to accumulate asset, mobilise resources to finance the cost of sending their own children abroad, acquire a plot of land and start a building project, and or continually support the consumption, health or education needs of family members. In all the four communities, young peoples’ imagined futures were often gendered; males dreamed of investment in assets (e.g. acquisition of residential plots, investment in large commercial farms, building projects and financing the cost of migration of children abroad), whereas the plans of females had more to do with establishing a business (trade), supporting the education of their children as well as providing support for the needs of other family members. Young people suggested that the odds had been stacked against them in relation to pursuing these imaginary projects:

“Most of my dreams and aspirations have been shattered. I wanted to build a house and buy a car. When I was supporting my siblings to travel abroad, my children were very young so I expected that they would help my children in return, but there was no help. I then decided to work harder to help my children also travel abroad but with this ban, that ambition is on hold because I don’t have any money to send my children abroad (Interview, 25th January 2019, Donkoto- Lino).”

Another interviewee lamented:

“I am unable to pursue some of my dreams again because now I am not making enough money as I used to” (Interview, 16th February 2020, Ahwenease).

Unlike the ASM sector which provided young people with the opportunity to earn significant income to imagine a future with hopes of pursuing these ambitious projects, interviewees wondered which other economic activity they could engage in to follow their imaginary futures.

4.5. Coping with the ban: youth navigation and exploitation of other opportunity spaces

Our interviewees said that they had to develop responses to the ban and its associated destruction of their livelihoods in order to survive or improve their life chances. Many reported relying on social networks in order to cope with the difficulties they were experiencing. Networks of social relations, including family members, friends and other community members, have been instrumental in supporting young people to exploit ‘near opportunity spaces’ to start other livelihoods within their communities. A 25-year-old female interviewee who used to run errands and carry sand and water for galamsey miners in Bibiani Old Town describes how she suffered financially in the first six months of the imposition of the ban. However, she says she was fortunate as she has been relying on locally known people, mainly farmers and shop owners in the community to survive. She receives phone calls whenever the farmers or shop owners need extra labour to carry out tasks. For example, she narrated that she would sometimes assist farmers to carry farm produce from the farm gate to the market or house for a fee. Also, she occasionally worked as a shop attendant especially during busy market days for a negotiated fee. Interestingly, she describes the work she does for the farmers and the shop owners as a ‘menial job’ but nevertheless recognises that it fetches her money to cater for her needs and that of her family members. A male interviewee who is currently unemployed stated that he receives financial assistance and support from his siblings in order to survive:

“Currently, my siblings are those supporting me. When I made money, I made sure I supported them, so they are taking care of me now. Even today, they have sent me some money. It would have been very difficult without them” (Interview, 10th December 2018, Donkoto Lino).

Those who had some savings reported that they moved quickly to establish a farm or non-farm enterprise when the ban was introduced. For example, a male interviewed in Donkoto-Lino revealed that he decided to invest his accumulated savings in the establishment of a vegetable (e.g. cabbage, pepper, carrot) farm, and the proceeds from this farm is what he now relies on to survive. A female interviewed in Afiesa site for instance narrated “personally, the benefit I got from it [galamsey] was the sewing machine I bought. Now, I can use the machine to sew to generate some money for food (Interview, 15th February, Ahwenease).

In Afiesa and Ahwenease communities, interviewees reported that many inhabitants, including young people, who have been deprived of their livelihoods in the ASM sector are now into the extraction and sale of fuelwood for survival. Compared to Bibiani municipality, the dense local forest in the Abuakwa South Municipality seems to have spearheaded young people’s entry into fuelwood extraction and sale for survival after the ban:

“The main occupation currently in this town is the cutting down and collection of firewood for sale. That’s what the women cut to sell. There’s no work here. At first when there was gold business, that was
what everyone was doing. But when the gold business collapsed, both males and females now cut firewood to sell. You sell too they wouldn’t buy. The collapse of the gold business has created financial problems. If you don’t go to gather firewood and sell, then you will not get money to buy food (Interview, 15th February 2020, Afiesa).

Moreover, both male and female interviewees reported travelling to other locations when the ban on ASM was introduced. Depending on their reading of the opportunity space, young people moved to either another rural location or the city to undertake some form of economic activity mainly in the non-farm sector including trading (e.g. selling cooked-food, and retail of household equipment), shop assistant, porter, cinema/video operators, and construction (e.g. masons, plumber, tilers). Many reported to have returned to their communities to invest their accumulated savings into either a farm or non-farm business or both. For instance, an interviewee mentioned that:

“As soon as they introduced the ban on galamsey, there was hardship so I travelled. I left my home town and went to other towns, suffering and doing jobs I did not deserve to do. I was a porter just to make money to cater for my wife and child” (Interview, 4th January 2019, Bibiani Old Town).

Finally, some interviewees who have been rendered unemployed as a result of the ban, particularly the males with no formal education are now engaged in risky behaviour (e.g. thievery) in order to survive. Our interviewees reported an increase in local petty crime rates and drug abuse by former ASM miners because of loss of income and frustration caused by the ban:

“The collapse of the galamsey business has resulted in many robberies in the town [ ….] Now you can hear of people stealing farmers’ produce like plantain because hunger is prevalent unlike before the ban” (Interview, 14th February, Afiesa).

It is worth mentioning that young people’s engagement in such activities cannot be condoned as it has effects on both the perpetrators and society at large.

5. Discussion

Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that young people who were actively building their livelihoods in the ASM sector are seemingly frustrated by government’s action to place a ban on ASM activities. Their frustration emanates from their engagement in ASM over several years, which had helped them to master the skills, know-how and techniques in building their livelihoods in the sector. On top of this is the undeniable economic and social stress, and the sense of opportunities being stacked against them since losing their jobs in 2017.

Our research demonstrates that ASM is the only economic activity in which young people engaged to earn income. Reflecting the findings of recent studies (See Hilson et al., 2013; Zolnikov, 2020), our research establishes that engagement in ASM provided the youth with a source of livelihood and a livelihood. The disappointment with school careers, inability of young people to secure formal employment even when they come to understand the ban had placed many in an uncertain situation with respect to pursuing their imagined futures. Indeed, livelihood building efforts rendering them unemployed and faced with severe social and economic hardships (financial hardships), to the extent that they were finding it difficult to return to the lifestyles that they had previously.

Furthermore, young men and women imagined a future where they will acquire more assets, support the migration of family members/children abroad, and establish new economic ventures. The ability to build a livelihood and pursue these imaginary projects has the potential to offer new forms of sociality for young people to prove their sense of identity and independence (Filmer and Fox, 2014). Nevertheless, these imagined futures reflect more or less attainable aspirations but also flights of fancy because the future always admits of the unplanned, the unforeseen, the unknowable, the intervention of external factors beyond the control of individuals, which may influence the shape of things to come” (Crow et al., 2011: 5). The loss of job, breakdown of family relations, income and livelihoods, and the concomitant financial hardship brought by the ban had placed many in an uncertain situation with respect to pursuing their imagined futures. Indeed, livelihood building and realisation of imagined futures are likely to be tempered by social forces within which agents are embedded. This require of agents (young people) to re-assess longer-term goals and new situation-fitting strategies and tactics (Yeboah, 2020). As Dang (2015) notes, the futures that young people imagine for themselves are not fixed categories, but often a mystery that may not follow the rational calculations of young people. Imagined futures are thus dynamic and change over time. The ‘opportunity structures’ including the socio-economic, cultural or political policy contexts (e.g. legislation to ban ASM) together with global and
local processes are likely to shape and influence young peoples’ imagined futures in a variety of ways (Yeboah, 2020; Dang, 2015). As it stands, it is not all that clear whether these youngsters can imagine a future with the hopes of new beginnings and possibilities for improved life chances. The extent to which their coping strategies will serve them well in their pursuit of different imagined projects is an open question.

Nevertheless, the ability to become ‘mobile’ allowed young people to take advantage of ‘distant opportunities’ to cope with their financial and social difficulties. Mobility, including migration, which has long been described as a livelihood diversification strategy (see for example, De Haas 2010) was used by young people as a key coping mechanism to survive the ban. Depending on their readings of where the opportunity was, young people travelled to other rural communities or urban areas to undertake some form of economic activity (mainly retail trade and work in the construction sector), and access social and economic resources. The capital raised from working elsewhere typically in menial jobs was used to establish small scale non-farm business activities. While some managed to succeed in investing their resources in new economic set-ups in their respective communities, a few simultaneously engaged in a range of activities by either combining their new economic set-ups in the non-farm sector with farm work (see also Gough and Birch-Thomsen, 2017).

Moreover, family and broader social relations are instrumental in enabling young people cope with the economic and social hardships brought by the ban. Many young people rely on social networks to secure financial assistance to meet consumption needs and also seek and exploit ‘near opportunities’ particularly in the non-farm sector, to restart a new livelihood in order to survive. In effect, young people are coping with the economic effects of the ban with and through family members.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, while the ban on ASM might have contributed in part to some gains made in preserving or protecting natural resources of the country, as anticipated by the few participants who believed ASM was deleterious to the environment, it has also fundamentally re-structured the opportunity space for many millions of young people who were building their livelihoods in this sector, to the extent that many have lost their source of employment and income. Moreover, many young people emphasised the economic dimensions of their futures (whether to continue to accumulate assets, establish new economic ventures, acquire a plot of land and start a building project, and or mobilise resources to finance the cost of sending children abroad). Nevertheless, young men and women encountered ‘opportunity structures’ of which the most commonly cited was government action to place a ban on ASM activities where they derive their livelihood. Indeed, the imagined future selves of the young people seems to have been distorted, placing them in an uncertain situation and it is likely that many millions of young people whose livelihoods were dependent on the ASM sector will continue to experience economic hardship into the foreseeable future. The extra burden is expected to be particularly keen for those who are already responsible for children and ageing parents.

Our findings call into question the need to understand the trade-off between the environmental problems brought by ASM activities on the one hand and how the ban on ASM activities impact the lives, livelihoods and imagined futures of young people on the other. Such a trade-off is particularly important recognising that disengaging young miners from ASM activities through government action is likely to shape the futures that young people imagine themselves. It is fundamentally clear that with the ban on ASM still in place coupled with the current economic climate in Ghana where access to decent and gainful remunerative employment is lacking, young people cannot continue to dream of a future where they can, for example, continue to accumulate assets, unless they are able to secure remunerative economic opportunities and symbolic capital necessary for pursuing these imaginary projects in transition into adult futures. We argue that until and unless there are hastened steps to formalise ASM to allow those engaged in the sector to return to work, young people would have to adapt their future plans to reflect the circumstances and reality within which they find themselves.

Author contribution

Lydia Osei: Conceptualisation, Data curation, methodology, writing- original draft. Thomas Yeboah: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing-Original draft. Emmanuel Kumi: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing-Original draft, Writing- Review and Editing; Ernestina Fredua Antoh: Data curation, Writing- Review and Editing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

We declare that we have no conflict of interest.

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