

Wrapping up this series of blogs, I know that I, and the members of our research team, have a long way to go in this journey to understand the complex supply chain dynamics in the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector; how these dynamics are gendered; and how policy, governance, and technological change at the national, county, and local levels are having an impact on the livelihoods of women and men working in ASM. I was happy to be able to tell the people that I interviewed that I would be back in Migori next year – some of the people there have seen outsiders turn up before, promising to help or, more importantly, to invest in the mining sector, only to disappear just as suddenly and never come back.

I'm very much looking forward to going back to Migori next year, and it seems likely that there will have been some changes. Kenya's devolution process continues, though according to the new Constitution responsibility for natural resource management is to remain at the national level. A mining bill is also being considered at the national level. County government officials, too, told us that they had their own plans for improving the lives of artisanal miners at the local level. At least one international organization – Fairtrade International and the local organization, Fairtrade Africa – has been involved in the sector for several years now, working with a local mining cooperative in the area. Migori's civil society umbrella group, the Migori County Civil Society Organizations Forum, is placing increased emphasis on mining. Meanwhile, the fluctuating – and recently low – price of gold has undoubtedly impacted buyers and sellers. Artisanal mining is generally portrayed as a traditional, unskilled, unchanging sector by African governments and in the media, but in reality it is a sector that is highly dynamic, responsive, and connected to broader developments nationally and internationally.

The dynamism of the ASM sector, along with some other results of this preliminary research, were more or less along the lines of what I expected to find on the basis of previous desk-based research. What I was less sure about was how the research itself would unfold. As someone with a background in project assessment and civilian protection work in Central Africa, this was my first experience doing academic research abroad. I wasn't sure how people would respond to my presence, or to my questions that are not linked to any promise of project funding or material resources. Having previously worked in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where many of the people I came into contact with were extremely poor, I was uncertain how I would manage the ethical issues that are an integral part of conducting research in poor countries with groups of people who are, at least in some ways, marginalised.

The research in Kenya proved to be easier in certain ways, and more difficult in others, than I expected. The authorities were happy to receive and speak with us, and for several reasons they were easier to deal with than many of the authorities I've encountered in other countries. Overall I got a sense that the authorities were doing things and making things happen for their constituencies. That was a welcome change from countries I've worked in where institutions are not well developed, and there are few incentives for government officials to invest time or funds into local

betterment. The civil society leaders, both women and men, with whom we met were, in a word, wonderful. From the woman who counsels women in HIV-discordant relationships, to the woman who uses her own resources to help children in abusive or difficult situations, to the human rights activist who pursues justice to the detriment of his own livelihood – they have all generously given of their time for this research not because we can pay them, but because they believe that it matters.

Gathering information at the mine site was a different story. Simple observation was easy, because we connected with several people who took the time to accompany us through the mine sites on a few occasions. The first time we drove up to the mine site, we could see it from the hills above as we drove down. The mine site is busy, and there's a lot going on. A cluster of long, low tin-roofed buildings greet you as you enter.



Corrugated tin buildings at the mine site entrance

As you walk through the site, you come to an array of sluice ponds surrounded by people working busily. If you penetrate still further, you come to a series of dirt paths winding through a small collection of market stalls, bars, and even hotels. The site is a hub of activity, and the feeling of frenetic movement is compounded by the ear-splitting noise of the crushers.



A machine for crushing ore, known as a “crusher” (the small brown machine on the right)

The level of activity and noise at the mine site poses a challenge for research, as does the lack of shelter from the burning sun and the absence of private spaces for one-on-one interviews or questionnaires. Another obstacle is the fact that everyone here is busy trying to make a living. The time they spend with us is time they could have spent digging for ore or panning for gold. The research will, we expect, make a difference in terms of improving the Kenyan policy environment for ASM, especially for women, but in an immediate sense that won't help the people here as much as finding that next gram of gold. It is a reality of which I am acutely aware as I go about my research.

One example of the challenge we face is our last mine site visit on this trip. I'd tried to get in touch with a woman I had met on a previous visit, but my calls and text messages went unanswered. When I went back to the location where we'd previously met our contact, no one recognised her name – which speaks to the transient nature of this type of site. We then went to a sluice pond nearby where a number of women were working. We asked them if they would be able to spare some time later to meet with us as a group, but they requested that we speak with them right there and then as they did their panning. We did our best, and we got some useful information, but setting up a genuine focus group, where men are not present and women can speak more freely, will clearly require the building of relationships and most importantly, of trust. It's becoming increasingly obvious to me why it's so important that this project is going to last over several years.

The high point of that site visit – and indeed, of much of the trip – came at the end. Just as we were about to leave, I saw my colleague approach a woman crushing stones near the entrance. After asking permission, he took up her hammer and gave it a go; he was very good at it! It was something I'd been hoping to try since the first

visit, but I had hesitated, not sure if it would be appropriate or if it would be perceived as mockery or appropriation. After a few minutes, my colleague got up and told me that the conversation I was hearing in Dhuluo (the local language) was the people gathered around saying that I should give it a go. I promptly proceeded to try it myself – it is every bit as hard as it looks! I consider myself to be in good shape, and I slowly got the hang of it, but after a few minutes my forearm was aching. I couldn't imagine crushing rocks for four hours under the hot sun. The smiles and laughter that we shared – including the woman taking a brief break from her arduous task – made me realize how eager I am to come back, to build those connections. I want to really understand the many things that are happening here and of which I'm only able to glimpse the surface thanks to the people I've met, who have graciously allowed me into their busy world.

