
From self-employment to dependence: fluid labour statuses and ownership rights in artisanal gold mining (Burkina Faso)

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Résumé

The latest "commodities boom" has (re)galvanized the mining sector in several West African countries, increasing in particular the production and export of gold. Both the industrial sector - boosted by growing foreign investments - and an expanding small-scale and artisanal sector are transforming the livelihoods and landscapes of many rural areas.

Working conditions in artisanal gold mining sites are difficult and precarious; yet, although characterized by power differentials and occasionally exploitative relations, the organization of labour in artisanal mines differs quite significantly from the industrial sector. In the extractive phase, production is organized in fluid patterns that usually combine teamwork and relations of dependence between miners and chiefs, on one side, with individual ownership of the extracted ore, on the other. This allows the coexistence of an ethos based on trust, friendship and even mechanisms of social protection with the lure of instant wealth and individual success. The ambiguity is maintained along the processing chain, where transactions occur – both cash and in kind – between actors whose status of self-employed entrepreneurs can be challenged at any moment.

The strategic use of formal legislation, and the role played by private permit holders and official authorities in the hybrid models of governance at work, also contribute to uncertainty and conflicting claims on ownership from the various economic actors operating in small-scale mines. The ambiguous status of the workforce can then become a tool for flexible adaptation, in a context where rapid technological and economic change can generate oscillations between different organizational models and shifting balances of power in the relations of production. I will present some examples of similar processes and reflect on their implications on the nature of labour and the organization of work, drawing from my ethnographic research in several artisanal gold sites in Western Burkina Faso (2012-17).

Mots-Clés: mining, informal economy, socio, technical change

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