



Kansai university and Faculty of Economics



International Symposium

Africa and Asia Entanglements in Past and Present : Bridging History and Development Studies

Entangled in Elite Accumulation: Key interests and actors in Zimbabwe's Artisanal and Small Scale Mining

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Abstract

This article looks at the key interests and actors in Zimbabwe's pervasive Artisanal and Small Scale Mining Sector (ASM). Zimbabwe's economic and political crisis from the late 2000s onwards led to massive decline in formal sector employment and rapid growth of the informal sector. A key feature of this informality has been the massive growth of ASM. By examining the organization of the sector, actors and interests this paper shows how Zimbabwe's ASM served a triple function, patronage, livelihood and accumulation. It reveals the blurring of lines between informality and formality. This brings to question the most common heuristic tools of analysis of informality which view the sector as exclusively survivalistic. ASM gold mining has metamorphosed from merely being a survival strategy for the poor to being a highly contested arena for accumulation in which those with access to state power play a dominant role. Controlling extraction and trade in ASM are part of a bigger story of elite accumulation and patronage, through which the ruling ZANU-PF party has been able to sustain its political power. The article cautions those who approach ASM only through debates over grass-roots, informal survivalism, and also suggests some of the ways in which elite accumulation in the sector has provided not only lucrative opportunities for a broad network of lower ranking party or state agents but also work for locals and itinerant ASM miners who would otherwise be jobless. These conclusions are based on an analysis of interviews and consultations with key stakeholders either directly or indirectly related to the sector. More than 30 key informant interviews and stakeholder consultative meetings were conducted during a two months period from September 2014 to November 2014. This was augmented by desk research and literature analysis, to provide a historical and contextual understanding.