



FACTS ON *Small-Scale Mining*

While most of the attention in the mining industry is focused on large companies, in many countries more minerals are extracted in the process of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM). This largely unregulated mining typically occurs in and around rural communities where farming and other occupations do not provide enough for families to survive. Small-scale mining operations often operate illegally and receive little in the way of supervision or support from the local or central authorities.

The majority of workers in ASM exploit small deposits in remote rural areas, from where it is difficult for miners to get their goods to the market. Their work is labour-intensive, low paying, extremely hazardous, and almost always avoided if other work is available. Children as young as ten years old are frequently used in the mines.

Furthermore, ASM causes significant damage to public health and the environment by destroying the landscape and spreading pollutants such as mercury and cyanide.

With the assistance of governments, employers and workers' organizations in the mining industry, ASM can be officially recognized and properly managed to help reduce poverty, increase foreign exchange earnings and prevent rural migration and environmental destruction. Proper legal and social support can turn ASM into a valuable source of economic and sustainable development, particularly in rural areas.

The Challenge of Regulating Small-Scale Mining

China's small-scale coal mines, which employ roughly 2.5 million people, are among the world's most dangerous. Official statistics suggest that around 6,000 people die each year in these mines. But recent attempts by the government to deal with this issue demonstrate how difficult and complex the problem can be. In June 2001, the central government issued a State Order to shut all the country's small mines immediately – citing their bad record on health and safety and their environmental pollution. However, in addition to the economic

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Key Statistics

- Nearly 13 million people worldwide work in artisanal and small-scale mining, and an estimated 100 million depend on it for their livelihood.
- ASM extracts a wide range and large quantity of minerals – ranging from gold and precious stones to zinc, coal and bauxite. In Ghana, ASM produces 60% to 70% of the diamonds mined in that country.
- Small-scale mineworkers face huge safety and health problems – such as exposure to dust, mercury and other chemicals as well as poor ventilation, inadequate space and overexertion. The risks of death or fatal injuries caused by explosions, falling rocks or poor equipment are very high.
- Silicosis and mercury poisoning are occupational hazards of small scale mining that also extend to people living in the surrounding community.
- Women provide up to 50% of the small-scale mining workforce, but their compensation typically lags behind that of male mineworkers.
- A large number of children work in ASM. In Papua New Guinea, for example, children provide up to 30% of the small-scale mining workforce.
- In many countries, more than half of small-scale miners are thought to operate illegally. In Madagascar, almost all of the US\$400 million worth of gemstones mined each year are exported illegally.

hardships that closing the mines will bring to remote communities, many of the mines will likely continue to operate illegally and further removed from regulation. In Hunan province in central China, for example, the government has closed some mines as many as 20 times.

Role of the ILO

The ILO has been a leader in addressing the working conditions and rights of small-scale miners. Following a series of international meetings (including the ILO's Tripartite meeting on social and labour issues in small-scale mining), the Communities and Small-scale Mining (CASM) initiative was launched in 2001 with the aim of reducing poverty in developing countries by improving policies on a national and grass-roots level. According to the ILO, the legalisation of small-scale mining is a key step on the road to sustainability. With this in mind, CASM aims to promote social dialogue and involve governments and workers in all sectors of the mining industry in order to address local economic, environmental, social and labour issues.

Relevant ILO Resolutions

Resolution concerning the fundamental Conventions of the International Labour Organization and future activities of the ILO in small-scale mines (June 1999)

International Labour Organization
4, route des Morillons
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland
Tel. 41 22 799 7912
Fax 41 22 799 8577
<http://www.ilo.org/communication>