

Commentary

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“Help ‘our’ unbelief” on galamsey in Ghana

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Special Edition on Galamsey

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In this issue of the Journal, readers will find several articles on one of the most enduring problems bedevilling our nation in recent times, i.e., artisanal surface mining - popularly known as *galamsey*. A lot has already been written on the destructive effects of this phenomenon and practice on our ecosystems and biodiversity. Many organisations and individuals, including professional and religious bodies, civil society organisations, the clergy and traditional leaders have at various times, condemned the practice and lent their voices and support in their bid to contribute to finding a solution to the *galamsey* menace. However, the fact that the practice persists and may even be thriving despite the wider societal disapproval and not least, the immense effort and resources invested towards addressing same, is a reflection of how pervasive and deeply entrenched the phenomenon may have infiltrated several levels of our society. Indeed, some of our compatriots have, rightly, labelled *galamsey*, an “existential threat” to our nation, Ghana.

In a paper titled, “*Decentralisation, informal mining, and environmental health: a political ecology perspective on Ghana’s mineral wealth management*” [1], Adam, examines the ramifications of decentralising natural resource governance and empowering local communities as an approach to address the *galamsey* menace. The author advances a conceptual frame for why this approach may facilitate the agency of local communities. While this may be considered an attractive notion, not least because it aligns with the ethos of some of our known land *ownership* customs and traditions – where land and by extension, ownership of other natural resource where such exists - is

held in trust for the people by an appropriate authority. An apparent deficiency of this concept though, would be its inadequacy to explain or rationalise the blatant *galamsey*-associated exploitation and devastation of land, farms, drinking water sources and even dwelling spaces in some of the communities where such customs are assumed to be the norm. It may be that the applicable political, legal and social concepts proffered by Kuditchar [2] in a paper titled “*decoding the persistence of galamsey in Ghana: the meta-contradictions of neutered law*” could serve to illuminate aspects of the underlying contextual factors that may be responsible for this paradox. Alas, *galamsey* it is said, is driven or facilitated by (supposedly powerful) actors and forces from within the Ghanaian communities, in which case the populace may simply be witnessing what could be described as the heralding manifestations of the tensions between the norms of a bygone era and the aspirations of a *brave new world* of treasure hunters.

Awemomom and colleagues in their article [3] enumerate some of the known risks associated with exposure to heavy metals and chemicals used in artisanal mining, in a review paper aptly titled “*Health risks and birth defects associated with exposure to galamsey-related pollutants*.” Among others, the authors recommend studies of bioavailability and toxicology as necessary investigations to be seen as complementary to the battery of other ongoing studies - a recommendation that is fully endorsed.

Asare and colleagues [4] in a subsequent review article, titled, “*vulnerability to infectious diseases and risk reduction measures among galamsey gold mining communities in Ghana*,” throw additional light on the linkages between *galamsey* activities and the incidence of infectious diseases while elucidating aspects of the

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biological reservoir-environment-disease nexus to press home pertinent issues raised afore. While their recommendations do not deviate so much from public health orthodoxies, these succinctly provide a sort of roadmap to the direction we should be taking as a community to forestall some of the public health consequences of the phenomenon. The authors also poignantly, remind us to safeguard the gains made in the quest to control of communicable diseases, relevant as we have begun grappling with an escalating incidence and rising burden of non-communicable diseases. A case report by Issaka and colleagues [5], of a cascade of silicosis-pneumothorax-respiratory failure may exemplify the nature of conditions we should expect to increase should the present trajectory of pollution and environmental degradation remains unaltered.

Opoku et al., showcase primary data in their paper titled, “*Environmental exposure and potential health impact of heavy metals in previous mining communities in Ghana*,” confirming anticipated elevated levels of pollutants associated with mining, in water, soil, food, and vegetation from samples taken from abandoned *galamsey* sites [6]. Given the trends shown by the data, it is difficult to over-emphasize and yet impossible to overlook the magnanimity with which the authors’ call for “remediation and reclamation of affected land” and the charitable appeal with respect to the obvious ‘enforcement of mining restrictions and regulations’.

Finally, in a paper titled, “Statement on illegal mining” [7], the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences (GAAS) in a no holds barred style, pivots to the crux of the matter in the starkest terms: “*Ghana is on the brink of an ecological, health and social disaster as a result of illegal mining...and immediately afterwards, ‘we are rapidly approaching the precipice...’*” The Academy, Ghana’s foremost learned society, declares forcefully that it “*can no longer sit in silence*” and with characteristic erudition, trace the evolution of the historical and legal framework surrounding *galamsey*, outline the relevant biological, environmental, economic, health and socio-cultural concerns and importantly, proposes a way forward. GAAS in

their article appeal directly to the ‘powers that be’ to declare a moratorium on illegal mining and unambiguously call for legislation that have provided loopholes and deliberate or inadvertent cover to *galamseyers*, to be revoked.

The seven papers published in this issue of HSI Journal on *galamsey* is an aggregation of ideas, expertise and thoughts from a wide disciplinary perspective - yet another opportunity to raise a ‘silent voice’ with the hope that it will be sufficiently audible to be heard by those clothed with the power, authority and means to find address the *galamsey* menace in Ghana.

Within the context of our craft as educators, we have an obligation to ensure we prepare a fit-for-purpose cadre of scholars who possess the zeal to address the problem of *galamsey* in Ghana even as it continues to evolve. Our healthcare delivery training mandate imposes an even acute obligation on us to ensure the training of the calibre of healthcare personnel with the the training, skill and preparedness to anticipate, quantify, and characterise the magnitude and trajectory, of potential health consequences of *galamsey* on our nation, from a preventive, diagnostic, curative and rehabilitative perspective. Daunting a task this may appear, especially as the phenomenon appears to be escalating, with once-pristine rivers, waterbodies and lush vegetation turning to contaminated marshland, and a real threat – probably since the settling of our population on this land - of scarcity and spectre of importation of drinking water for future generations. This seeming bleak scenario may enjoin us to take solace in the saying to the effect that “*Hardships often prepare ordinary people for an extraordinary destiny*” (which is attributed to C. S. Lewis). I view the sentiments conveyed in the GAAS Statement to be instructive as they are humbling, in a way that makes it irresistible to conjure imagery of the circumstances within which the desperate cry, “*Help thou mine (our) unbelief*,” was uttered in the scriptures (Mark 9:23 (New King James Bible) and maintain the hope that the practice of *galamsey* in Ghana must be stopped.

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