

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 natural ecosystems and biodiversity. Many organisations and individuals, including professional and religious bodies, civil society organisations, clergy and traditional leaders have at various times, condemned the practice and lent their voices and support in the bid to find a solution to the menace. However, the fact that galamsey persists and may even be thriving despite the wider societal disapproval and immense effort and resources invested towards curbing the practice, is a reflection of how pervasive and deeply entrenched the menace may be in our society. Indeed, some of our compatriots have, rightly labelled *galamsey*, an “existential threat” to our nation.

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 appropriate conceptual approach to addressing the issue. The author advances a case for why this approach may facilitate the agency of local communities and the viability of such approbation. An attractive concept, not least because it aligns with relevant ethos of some traditional land ownership customs – in which land and by extension, natural resource ownership is held in trust for the people by the relevant authorities. An apparent deficiency of this concept would be its inadequacy to explain or rationalise

the blatant exploitation and devastation of land, farms, water bodies and dwelling places even in communities where such customs are supposedly operative. An exposition on some of 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*” illuminate aspects of the underlying contextual and other factors that may be responsible for the paradox. Alas, galamsey it is said, is driven by (supposedly powerful) actors, with the populace simply witnessing heralding manifestations of the tensions between the norms of a bygone era and the aspirations of a *brave new world*.

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

Asare and colleagues [4] in another 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 infectious diseases while elucidating aspects of the *biological reservoir-environment-disease* nexus. While their recommendations do not deviate much from public health orthodoxies, they succinctly outline strides we should be making as a community towards ameliorating some of the anticipated public health consequences of galamsey-associated activities. The paper poignantly, reminds us of the critical

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need to safeguard gains made in the control of the quintessential communicable diseases, especially as we have begun grappling simultaneously with an escalating burden of non-communicable diseases. A case report by Issaka and colleagues [5], of silicosis-pneumothorax-respiratory failure cascade, may exemplify the nature of the conditions to be expected should the present trajectory being traversed remains unaltered.

Opoku et al., present primary data in their paper titled, “*Environmental exposure and potential health impact of heavy metals in previous mining communities in Ghana,*” confirming anticipated high levels of mining-associated pollutants in water, soil, food, and vegetation from samples taken from abandoned land in gamamsey communities [6]. Given the trends in the data, it is difficult to over-emphasize and yet impossible to overlook the leniency in the authors’ call for “remediation and reclamation of affected land” or appeal in ‘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 imaginatively: “*Ghana is on the brink of an ecological, health and social disaster as a result of illegal mining...and then, ‘we are rapidly approaching the precipice....’* The Academy, Ghana’s foremost learned society, declares it “*can no longer sit in silence*” and, in characteristic erudite fashion, trace the evolution of the historical and legal framework surrounding gamamsey, while outlining the relevant biological, environmental, economic, health and socio-cultural concerns. Importantly,

GAAS proposes a way forward and directly appeals to the powers that be to declare a moratorium on illegal mining and unambiguously call for revocation of legislation that provided the loopholes that have been exploited to perpetuate the gamamsey menace.

The seven papers published in this issue of HSI Journal on gamamsey, an aggregation of ideas, expertise and thoughts, presents an opportunity to raise yet, another ‘silent voice’ in the quest to finding a solution to the menace. Within the context of our craft, there is an imposed imperative to ensure we have prepared a fit-for-purpose cadre of academics with the skill and zeal to address the problem even as it continue to evolve. Our mandate in the healthcare delivery training space also imposes an obligation to ensure the availability of the right calibre of personnel with the means and preparedness to anticipate, quantify, and characterise the magnitude and trajectory of potential health consequences, from a preventive, diagnostic, curative and holistic perspective. Daunting a task this may appear, given our circumstances, where once-pristine rivers are being turned to muddy contaminated marshland, and where future generations are threatened with water scarcity, we may take solace in the C. S. Lewis, quotation that “*Hardships often prepare ordinary people for an extraordinary destiny.*” The sentiments conveyed in the GAAS Statement on the gamamsey conundrum is instructive as it is humbling, and in a way that makes it possible to conjure even in the present, imagery of the circumstances within which the desperate cry, “*Help thou mine (our) unbelief,*” was uttered in the hebrew scriptures (Mark 9:23 (New King James Bible).

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