

REPORT SHEDS LIGHT ON BENEFITS OF SMALL-SCALE MINING

The controversial practice of artisanal and small-scale mining could offer millions of marginalised people a sustainable livelihood, but there are serious knowledge gaps in the sector that hinder effective and inclusive policymaking, says a report published today (5 March).

The lack of effective policies and knowledge required to generate such policies, as well as scant interest from development agencies, means this sector is largely operating illegally.

As a result, miners lack access to the rights, financial services, market information, technology and geological data that would enable them to make the most money while minimising environmental impacts.

And while there is good hands-on experience and innovation on the ground to improve the sector, these are either not widely known about or face huge implementation challenges that stall progress, says the report by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

Overall, artisanal and small-scale mining employs ten times more people than large-scale mining, providing jobs and income for 20-30 million of the world's poorest people and supporting the livelihoods of five times that number, according to the IIED.

It is practised mostly in poverty-stricken areas of developing countries.

In South Africa, for example, it is a means of livelihood for about 10,000 people, and as many as 12 million people in India, most of whom lack technological expertise and are largely unaware of the health and safety risks involved in mining.

The sector is partly driven by an increasing global demand for minerals such as tin and tungsten, which are used widely in the construction of high-tech gadgets.

But the sector also involves poor and vulnerable people, including women and children, and is renowned for its harsh working conditions and severe pollution: it is the world's second biggest mercury polluter (mercury is used in the process of small-scale mining for gold).

In some areas, however, small-scale mining has a lighter environmental footprint than large-scale mining as it "uses less energy, releases fewer greenhouse gases and produces less waste rock and tailings [mining waste material] per unit of gold", the report says.

"One of the things that is needed is a more detailed census of the characteristics of artisanal and small-scale mining at the national level," Sarah Best, interim programme leader for the IIED's Knowledge Programme on such mining, tells *SciDev.Net*.

"IIED is planning a new knowledge and network programme that will try and address the gaps and ultimately deliver better and more effective policies," says Best.

The report also recommends solutions such as scientific research into substitutes for mercury and the development of improved technology.

Source: <http://www.scidev.net/global/earth-science/news/report-sheds-light-on-benefits-of-small-scale-mining-1.html>