Ethical Challenges for Mineral Resource Extraction in Sierra Leone

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Sierra Leone is one of the world's poorest countries and has been so for over 40 years. It is currently ranked by the IMF as the tenth poorest country with a per capita GDP of $505. In recent years it has been ravaged by civil war (1991-2002) and paralysed by the Ebola virus. Yet it is a country rich in mineral resources – in particular diamonds, thus an economy highly dependent upon geoscientific knowledge. Sierra Leone therefore serves as an illustration of other African countries also rich in mineral resources. At The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge we are engaged in research into the relationship between Science, Faith and Human flourishing. However, in Sierra Leone the application of geoscientific knowledge is not leading to human flourishing. In fact the reverse is true. Maconachie, writing in 2012, states that ‘today, some of the worst poverty in Sierra Leone is concentrated in diamond mining towns’. In this particular context therefore the application of geoscience prevents human flourishing, a topic discussed elsewhere as the ‘resource curse’. It is suggested that an appropriate solution can be found in the concept of a ‘preferential option for the poor’ rooted in a Christian understanding of God's priority for the poor.

Diamonds have been mined in Sierra Leone since the 1930's and in 2016 it was Africa's seventh largest diamond producer and diamond exports made the largest contribution to the GDP. Much of the mining is alluvial and the deposits, distributed over several thousand km², are impossible to police. This has led to widespread illegal artisanal mining, extreme social exploitation through patronage, diamond smuggling, the funding and prolonging of a civil war. Further, legally exported diamonds yield a very low return to the local economy and there is a lack of economic transparency.

The fact that mining was not included in the UN 1992 Agenda 21, the Agenda for Sustainable Development means that the minerals industry globally is controlled almost entirely by the ‘free play of a market that is interested primarily in profits’. Recent models of sustainable development challenge this view and now see people as a part of the total ecosystem, so success is measured in terms of its long term contribution to human flourishing and will be expressed in respectful and authentic relationships at a local level between a mine and its community.

At a governmental level Sierra Leone is seeking to adopt the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative requiring greater corporate and social responsibility on the part of mining companies.
This initiative, which has received a renewed emphasis under President Bio, is designed to ensure that the ‘natural resource wealth becomes an engine for sustainable economic growth and poverty eradication in Sierra Leone’. However, it is unclear whether a governmental initiative can generate suitable authentic relationships at a local level. It is suggested here that locally based faith communities, where natural networks already exist, can play a better role in generating long-term authentic relationships between mine and community to foster human flourishing.