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Zamazama livelihood strategies in an abandoned Johannesburg gold mine: transitioning from the informal to the formal economy.

As part of my PHD project on cross-border migration I have been researching the working lives and career aspirations of women and men who are finding a livelihood by working informally in abandoned and closed mines. I have been conducting face-to-face interviews with what are popularly called the zamazama since 2013 (see miworc.org.za). My research strategy is ethnographic, including direct observations, in-depth interviews with participants and key players in the informal gold mining value chain. My preliminary findings demonstrate that illegal mining is a central source of livelihood strategies for poor families. The majority of those interviewed are hoping that the government will not close down the mine dumps. Surprisingly, they say they are willing to pay taxes to the government to ensure safety, sustainability and formalisation of their mining activities.

I am using the catastrophic incident which occurred in February 2013 and claimed the lives of twenty five informal miners at one of the mining dumps in Durban Deep, Roodeport, west of Johannesburg, as my case study. Twenty three Zimbabweans (including one woman), one Mozambican and one young Zulu migrant from KwaZulu Natal lost their lives. The incident resuscitated a debate by those who believe in the need to close down old mine dumps around Johannesburg. Three months later, the municipality and the police in collaboration with an unnamed “owner” of the ‘bloody’ shaft, sealed the ‘mouth’ of the illegal shaft. Despite the dangers and the trauma from the February disaster, two weeks later, zamazama reopened the shaft claiming that this was their only source of economic survival in a country where unemployment rate is high and, in the case of foreigners, the rigid and bureaucratic immigration policy makes it difficult for them to enter the formal labour market.

There is no single, easy, one-step way to formalize informal employment. Rather, it should be understood as a gradual, ongoing process of incrementally incorporating informal workers and economic units into the formal economy through strengthening them and extending their rights, protection and benefits. From my research, I recommend that the key players in the mining industry explore ways in which a vibrant and small-scale mining industry could be established in South Africa based on the large number of abandoned mines.

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