

Sierra Leone Diamonds Fuel Peace, Not War

FREETOWN, Sierra Leone—Legal diamond exports from Sierra Leone climbed to \$42 million in 2002—up from only \$1.5 million in 1999. This is helping the West African nation of 5 million recover from a bloody civil war that was fueled in part by illegal gem sales.

But industry experts estimate that the real commercial value of Sierra Leone's annual diamond exports is closer to \$300 million. An estimated five-sixths of all diamonds produced are still being exported illegally, draining a natural resource that could fuel development instead of war.

To monitor diamond royalties and fees, inform miners of the value of stones, halt environmental degradation, and reduce exploitation of miners—especially children—USAID brought together producers, buyers, advocates, government officials, and others in the Kono Peace Diamond Alliance in 2002.

The alliance is working to bring even more of the diamonds to the legal market and secure a bigger share of profits for mining communities. The coalition includes the Sierra Leonean government, industry heavyweight De Beers, diamond mining communities, local organizations, and international donors.

In 2000, 1,200 British military peacekeepers ended the 10-year Sierra Leone civil war, which, according to various estimates, killed 75,000–200,000 people. Many suffered amputations of hands and legs, mostly by adherents of the rebel Revolutionary United Front led by Foday Sankoh, who recently died of natural causes while in the custody of a U.N.-based war crimes tribunal.

Although rebels retained control of many diamond-producing areas, they agreed to end the fighting, allow the

government to control the diamond trade, and abide by a U.N. Security Council ban on illegal diamond sales.

Even before the war, diamond mining in Sierra Leone was rife with exploitation. Groups of “diggers” typically stand knee-deep in watery pits, using shovels and sieves to sift through soil, sand, and water. Miners are in perpetual debt because they have to borrow money to pay rent to local chiefs for mining sites and to cover their living costs.

Smuggling tiny diamonds across a border is easy to do and nearly impossible to detect. The Kimberly Process, a recent global pact, requires that certificates of legal origin be shown prior to diamond sales, but fake documents are widely used.

The Kono Alliance is addressing smuggling and exploitation by connecting miners with internationally recognized buyers. For example, the alliance established an information hub in Kono, the major diamond district in Sierra Leone, which offers training to help miners assess the true value of rough diamonds.

USAID will soon unveil a pilot program that will give miners access to credit at reasonable terms and help them sell their stones to the highest bidder.

Meanwhile, for the first time, mining communities received a cut of the tax revenues from diamond sales to build public structures, markets, and schools. In 2002, proceeds to communities reached \$280,000; in 2003, they are expected to reach a half million. ★

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USAID has been working with the Kono Peace Diamond Alliance to reduce the exploitation of diamond miners in Sierra Leone and help them sell stones at fair prices.