



DIAMONDS WITHOUT SPARKLE

Thousands of children work in mines, searching for valuable stones and missing out on precious rights.

Fifteen-year-old René might be wearing a Mickey Mouse baseball hat, but he is covered in red dust – like all miners. He says the life of the “digger” is tough in the strip mine. He has seen children, some much younger than he, get injured. He once witnessed a cave-in that killed a friend who wasn’t even 10 years old. But the day he found his first diamond, René forgot about that. “That day,” he admits, “I told myself that God had blessed me.”

He sold his treasure for 20,000 Congolese francs (about US\$40) and bought himself some clothes. Not the tattered T-shirt he’s wearing today, but the clothing he wears on Sundays. He doesn’t go to school anymore. He works. He digs two days a week. The rest of the time, he helps his family run a small grocery store in his village, Tshilumbu Mpumbue. In Chiluba, the local language, the name means “man with problems.” With its streets filled with impoverished children, diamond traders and rumbling SUVs from Dubai, the town seems to be aptly named. It is adjacent to Mbuji Mayi, an industrial diamond capital, a company town synonymous with MIBA (Minière de Bakwanga), a joint-venture that has been granted the main concession.

In Tshilumbu Mpumbue, mud huts, as red as the topsoil, border sandy, rubbish-strewn alleyways. Its little shops sell beans, peanuts – and diamonds. There are gems everywhere, but wealth is nowhere to be seen. Most town residents moved here after 1982, the year mining was “liberalised.” Before that, only companies with claims granted

by the government could mine diamonds. But now, thousands of men and children descend into the strip mines every day, searching for the hardest gem of all. They extract rock-strewn soil, dry it in the sun and sift it with water in the hopes of finding precious stones.

During the dry season, they build kilometres of dykes on the bed of the Lubilanji River, which delimits the MIBA land. For many here, the river is a natural border between fortune and hardship. The diggers pump out the river water before reinforcing the banks with sandbags to prevent cave-ins. Then they excavate the river bottom – but only on their side. The other bank is part of the MIBA claim. Some venture onto the other riverside at night-time, sometimes by the hundreds. These illicit miners even have a name: *“les suicidaires”* (the suicidals). It is forbidden, and these banks are closely watched. Gunfire is often exchanged between “diggers” and security forces. Nurses at the health centre closest to Tshilumbu Mpumbue, in Luamuella, say they see an average of three gunshot wounds every week.

This alluvial mining has destroyed all other economic activity. Like many other villagers, Chief Kelenda Mukandila Kalala, 53, remembers a time when he farmed corn, cassava, beans and peanuts. Now, none of his children (15 of whom still live in the village) are farmers. Subsistence farming has practically disappeared.

Prostitution, on the other hand, is commonplace. A bevy of hotels has sprung up in the centre of Tshilumbu Mpumbue. Sexually transmitted infections are common among diamond diggers and merchants, although it is not known how many are HIV-positive. It is impossible to get a screening test at the Luamuella health centre.

Are these precious stones a blessing or a curse for his village? “A curse,” replies Chief Kelenda Mukandila Kalala. Why? “Because diamonds bring home enough money to buy food, but not enough to pay for school.”

About 420 students are enrolled in the town's only elementary school. Its six classes gather not in a schoolhouse, but in a church. Here too, diamonds are the centre of attention. The diamond merchants' gaudy wealth devalues

poorly paid teachers. According to school principal Jean-Marie Muanza, a third of the students work in the mine. The boys carry bags of gravel, while girls carry the water used for sifting.

Like many other girls, 12-year-old Adèle must fetch water from the river. With her sister and mother, she rises every day at six o'clock and walks 13 kilometres to find water to sell to the diggers. They are paid 100 Congo-lesé francs (20 U.S. cents) for 20 litres.

Adèle may be just a cog in the diamond industry machine, but she still goes to school and loves it. Her favourite subject is French, although she has great difficulty reading and writing the language. This does not stop her from dreaming of having a “good job” some day. Any job, she says, but definitely not the one she has now.

Many families put all their hopes into these little stones. Diamonds are not only their bread and butter, but also their lottery ticket. The work is tough, dangerous and thankless, but the miners are driven by the possibility of unearthing a gem that will make them rich. Sometimes even the most

impoverished miners are able to buy a big house in Mbuji Mayi, the nearby city. There is no running water or electricity there, but for many miners, living in a bungalow would be a dream come true.

It is little wonder that these gems, even uncut and without sparkle, looking no more spectacular than grains of coarse salt, give rise to a great deal of envy. In Tshilumbu Mpumbue, 25-year old diamond merchant Ngandu Ngando Mao has diamonds on display in his straw shelter. With his blue and white shirt, he adds a touch of elegance to a place that exudes the opposite. But, he asserts, "selling diamonds is like selling peanuts." He watches over his precious stones and weighs them with small scales. A one-carat diamond weighs the same as two Swedish matches.

Ngandu Ngando Mao knows that many children start digging at the age of 12. They are easy to spot. Their clothes take on the colour of the reddish earth they handle all day long – and sometimes at night. Some children actually start working at a much earlier age. It is not unusual to see six-year-

olds carrying bags of gravel on their shoulders. The work is back-breaking, and Ngandu Ngando Mao has promised himself that if his wife gives birth to a son some day, he will never send him to work in the mine. "When you find something," he says, "You can make a lot of money. But there is a down side – death."

