

Sierra Leone: De Beers gem traders launch app to source clean diamonds

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De Beers has taken another step towards ridding the trade of its "blood diamond" tag with a mobile tracking app for miners in Sierra Leone. While Gemfair may be useful, more needs to be done to ensure safety.



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The Gemfair pilot app project is targeting small-scale, licensed miners in Sierra Leone. The software will show the GPS location of the gem extraction and allow for a record of the production process. It can be used offline or online.

Launched by De Beers, a unit of mining giant Anglo American, the app is at the centre of a pilot project to train miners to use the tablet and software which will track the diamond from source to consumer.

"By providing a secure route to market, offering fair prices and helping to raise standards, we hope to play a role in enhancing the prospects for those working in the sector," De Beers said in a statement.

The miners enrolling in the pilot project will also have to adhere to certain environmental standards and ensure the work sites are free from violence, among other requirements. There are not always checks for criminal records carried out on individuals involved in diamond mining or trading.

A step in the right direction

The reputation and allure of diamonds was tainted by association more than a decade ago with gems mined in war zones and sold to finance gang and warlord conflicts in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, the Republic of Congo, the Ivory Coast, the Central African Republic, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The movie, *Blood Diamond* starring Leonardo DiCaprio in 2006 exposed the problem worldwide.

Joanne Lebert, executive director at Impact, the NGO campaigning for improvement management of natural resources, said that while traceability was a step in the right direction, mining companies needed to adhere to international standards.

"It is not of itself, enough. Companies need to carry out due diligence to demonstrate they are producing and trading to international standards," Lebert said.

International standards have been set for mining policy, sourcing responsibly and for the identification and management of risks, she said.

Small-scale mining only accounts for about 20% of global diamond production and conditions at the sites, where miners often wash gravel by hand, are unhygienic and dangerous.

New sources of supply

De Beers does not have any mines in Sierra Leone, but hopes the project in the West African state may open up new sources of supply. It is working with the Diamond Development Initiative (DDI) NGO based in Ottawa, Canada which is working to formalise the small-scale mining sector in various parts of Africa.

"The DDI is focused on ensuring artisanal and small-scale miners have access to the opportunities, information and tools that help create self-sustaining communities and formally recognise the sector's contribution to economic development," Dorothee Gizenga, the DDI executive director said in a statement.

The aim is for the first stones to be bought from miners in the project this year. Enrolled miners will not be obliged to sell their gems to De Beers, who will make offers, regardless of the quality.

If the project phase is successful, De Beers intends to integrate the Gemfair technology into the diamond industry blockchain platform of linked data records it is developing.

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