

Gold mining reduces infant mortality rate

Large scale gold mining in sub-Saharan Africa has reduced infant mortality in nearby communities, with rates falling by 50% among those born within 10km of a gold mine.



Image source: Getty/Gallo

This is the conclusion of new research by Anja Benshaul-Tolonen published in the May 2019 issue of [The Economic Journal](#), who finds that local industrial development may be an effective way to reduce infant mortality in developing countries with high mortality rates from poverty.

Drawing on data on women's fertility records from demographic and health survey and large-scale gold mining data from eight countries over 30 years, the study shows that the average mortality rate in the communities before the mines open is 151 deaths per 1,000 births.

This rate drops during the investment of large-scale gold mining and continues to fall following the mine opening. The author finds that the rate drops by around 79 deaths per 1,000 births. This is the equivalent of the total gains in infant survival achieved in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1970s to today.

Role of economic growth

Many children die of poverty and its consequences with malnutrition and lack of basic healthcare among the main culprits. According to the author, the significant fall in infant mortality found in this study may come from increases in economic growth and that women living close to mines are 27% more likely to work in the service sector. Similarly, there are other possible explanations including increased health knowledge and access to remedies.

While child mortality rates are still high in sub-Saharan Africa, with one out of nine children dying before their fifth birthday, this fall in mortality is comparable to historic reductions. For example, in China mortality fell by 58 deaths per 1,000 births between 1960-70, or 79 deaths between 1960-1980, from an average of 121 deaths per 1,000 in 1960.

The author argues that industries can increase local income levels, and thus reduce poverty levels. But if these industries are polluting, they can negatively affect health in the population.

The study does not analyse adult health, so future studies should explore lifetime health of the population. And, the author suggests, as mortality levels become lower and the populations richer, industrial development may have very little, or even negative, effects on infant mortality rates as seen in developed countries.

Source: Royal Economic Society

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