

# How an ESG asset management firm struck gold

The Seventy Ninth Group is a property empire from Liverpool that turned to gold in Guinea and invested in communities along the way. Natalie Bellis, CEO of Seventy Ninth Group, is adjusting to UK time after a flight from Dubai, where the company's capital markets branch is based. Since the formation of the company, just three years ago, the business has grown rapidly. Bellis (pictured above, left, with colleagues and business partners in Dubai) now divides her time between the headquarters in Southport, Merseyside, and Dubai. "So, I'm there quite frequently, but it's a long trip," she says. "I'd love to say I switch off on the flight but it's the only chance I get to do emails", she laughs.

Long trips, however, are something the Seventy Ninth Group is very used to. The company name, informs Bellis, comes from the periodic table: the 79th element is gold. And gold, specifically gold exploration in the Republic of Guinea, is the Seventy Ninth Group's raison d'être. Prior to striking gold, company chairman Dave Webster forged a successful business in property development, buying his first ever buy-to-let property in Liverpool in 1991.

Prior to striking gold, company chairman Dave Webster forged a successful business in property development, buying his first ever buy-to-let property in Liverpool in 1991. By the 2010s, Webster's now sizeable nationwide portfolio was such that it allowed him to take early retirement. But, says Bellis, "retirement didn't suit him", and he was introduced to Guinea to learn about the growing commodities market there.

"Being an entrepreneur, he saw the opportunity," recounts Bellis. "It really opened his eyes to the world of commodities." Rather than continue his retirement, he set up the new business, bringing in his two sons Jake and Curtis as Managing



Natalie Bellis - Chief Executive Officer at The 79th Group

Director and Investment Director respectively. Bellis joined the Group as CEO in January 2021. "I knew of their interests in West Africa and was intrigued by it," she says. "I went in and met the family and instantly loved their ambition."

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The Websters have retained their UK property arm alongside the Guinean commodities business. While the former provides steady, stable returns, the other by its nature requires a long-term approach with an extensive risk management process. The two arms of the Group provide a perfect balance, says Bellis. Combined, “when all is said and done, it’s simply an asset management company focused on land – identifying, targeting and finding opportunities in undervalued assets, with significant, positive outcomes.”

These positive outcomes go beyond just financial returns, however. Central to both Webster and Bellis is the desire to ensure that local communities in Guinea benefit too. When Bellis took over as CEO, she was given the mandate “to drive the group’s ethical approach to the business”. Since then, environmental, social and governance (ESG) has been central to the Seventy Ninth Group’s approach.

Working in the mining sector presents “unique challenges from an ESG perspective,” admits Bellis. And they are not what you might expect. “People think you literally go out there and there’s an open mine waiting for you. In fact, it’s actually a piece of land,” she explains. “And it’s a beautiful piece of land.” Local knowledge – and local trust – is therefore key.

## Connecting with communities

This took Dave Webster years to build, from his very first trip in 2011. It took eight years, meeting with the elders of the community, to achieve “their sanction and blessing”. The intimacy gained became such that a local elder personally walked Dave Webster out to a site marked by a hand-laid rock many years ago, designating where a vein

of gold could be located – it proved to be correct.

This hands-on approach has continued as the projects have grown and evolved, and the payoff from developing relationships is something that Bellis refuses to take for granted. “It’s now embedded in everything we do – the fact that we still travel out to our concession sites and meet the communities and ask the important questions ourselves, not through third parties. The well-connected approach has served us so well already, and we fully intend to maintain that.”

*‘They need the skills to be able to progress – and that takes external contribution’*

Having a small environmental footprint, offset with a large social and economic impact, makes for a tricky yet rewarding balancing act. The Group’s back-office functions are now Green Mark and ISO certified: “for me, that was really fundamental at the early days of the Group’s incorporation to have those practices embedded and evidence that that’s how we operate”, says Bellis. While on the operational side, less invasive methods such as ‘air core’ drilling, which doesn’t require the heavy water-demand typically associated with gold mining, has proved an important innovation.

On the community development side, the Seventy Ninth Group partners with NGOs on the ground including the Red Cross to provide health and safety training not just for the workforce, but also for members of the wider community. A partnership with a local school is also seeing children trained for skills in agriculture, giving them additional choices for the future beyond simply

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mining. “That’s something really close to my heart,” says Bellis. “They just need the skills within the communities to be able to progress – and that does take a lot of external contribution.”

## Long-term projects

As we speak, the Seventy Ninth Group has just commenced a drilling campaign in Lusso South, in the Republic of Guinea, creating 36 new roles for local people. The aim of the campaign is to extract soil samples which can be sent to labs to help determine the mineral richness of the soil and, crucially, the value of the land itself. The previous drilling campaign in 2022 – the exploration phase in which geologists examine the soil for potential – yielded such positive results that this year’s campaign was expedited and presents a potential game changer for the company.

In-Country Manager, Eric Ntube, describes it as “incredibly fulfilling to see all this hard work and months of planning come to fruition.” This has included organising this drilling campaign, extensive development work, and relationship building with local communities.

“The Seventy Ninth Group have always wanted to do this in a way that positively impacted the local communities and the wider country as a whole,” he says. He and his team spent weeks engaging with the locals on the ground, visiting nearby villages, medical facilities and community sites. This included support for training and income-generating initiatives for youth and women’s groups.

*‘We want to have a positive impact on local communities and the country as a whole’*

The long-term plan is to continue to explore different concessions throughout the Republic of Guinea, not just in gold, but also iron ore, bauxite and diamonds. “We will continue to diversify,” confirms Bellis. Commodities and precious metals “are what the world needs”, she says. The Metal And Mineral Global Market Report 2023 found that the global metal and mineral market grew from \$7,541 billion in 2022 to \$8,126 billion in 2023, a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.8%, and is expected to grow to \$10,651 billion by 2027, driven in part by the demand for wireless electronics, batteries and electric vehicles.

This means, says Bellis, that the time is ripe “to be a game changer in this sector. There are more sustainable ways of doing this while equally helping everyone around you.” Within the next three to five years, the Group intends to list its commodities assets on the Canadian TSX V exchange. In the meantime, the strategy will continue to be, says Bellis, “to expand and grow within the communities that we’re in, building local employment and skills. That’s absolutely what we want to do.”