

Galamsey in Ghana: Mitigating its Negative Effects

By Felicia Dede Addy and Shikshya Adhikari

Ghana is one of the biggest producers of gold in Africa and the world.¹ Gold contributes significantly to Ghana's economy, and small-scale mining—an important means of income for many low-income Ghanaian households—produces about 30 percent of Ghana's total gold output.² Under Ghanaian law, small-scale gold mining is reserved for Ghanaians, but the boom in gold prices in the 2000s and Ghana's unprotected gold wealth drew thousands of Chinese miners to Ghana who started mining for gold illegally.³ Known locally as *galamsey*, illegal gold mining by Chinese migrants in Ghana has had devastating effects on the economy, the environment, communities, and women's security.

The Ghanaian government has adopted several measures to curb the proliferation of illegal mining, but these measures have been ineffective because of government incompetence, severe corruption, a weak judiciary system, rampant violence in communities, and the complicity of locals.

Civil society can play an important role in dealing with the adverse effects of *galamsey*. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are particularly important in raising awareness in communities, helping curb violence, protecting women and pressuring the government to be accountable and transparent. This policy brief looks at small-scale mining in Ghana and the growing problems associated with illegal Chinese miners. It lays out the obstacles that government and local communities face in curbing *galamsey* and relates how CSOs are pushing for solutions. We conclude by providing recommendations for more active civil society engagement, both nationally and transnationally.

Small-Scale Mining in Ghana

Indigenous small-scale mining dates back to the 15th century in Ghana. It is an important means of livelihood for many rural people, who use the income from mining to supplement meagre farming income. Ghanaian small-scale mining may be second only to agriculture in its ability to create jobs and boost the economy.⁴ About one million people work directly in the sector, and approximately four million work in services dependent on small-scale mining.⁵

With so many Ghanaians practicing small-scale mining, the government felt the need to regulate mining practices to streamline the sector's contribution to the economy, regulate the use of resources by small-scale miners, and provide official marketing channels for gold that the sector produced.⁶ In 1989, the government passed the Small-Scale Gold Mining Act, which introduced a licensing process. However, the process is highly bureaucratic, expensive, time-consuming, and riddled with corruption. Only those with money and political connections can secure licenses. Thus the process discourages many Ghanaians without money and influence from applying for and obtaining legal licenses. Since villages depended greatly on the mining sector, unlicensed small-scale mining continued.⁷

The scale of illegal mining expanded greatly in the 2000s, when Ghana's gold reserves and the surge in gold prices attracted many foreign miners from neighboring Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and countries such as Russia, Armenia, and China. Ghana saw an especially large influx of experienced Chinese miners.

Two main reasons explain the influx of Chinese miners.⁸ First, China's economic liberalization led many Chinese migrant workers to come to Africa for work in a range of industries. With its ample unprotected gold reserves, Ghana proved attractive to Chinese gold diggers. Second, the majority of the Chinese miners in Ghana come from the Guangxi autonomous region in China, a region with a long history of gold mining and expertise in advanced mining techniques. About 50,000 Chinese miners have flocked to Ghana over the past decade and have been illegally mining gold.⁹

Effects of Chinese Illegal Mining

Unregulated and illegal mining by Chinese migrants has severely challenged the Ghanaian government, local communities and rural populations. It has compromised the local economy and security, particularly the well-being and security of women. In response, the government passed the 2006 Minerals and Mining Act, which "reserved" small-scale mining for Ghanaian citizens, and instituted the Alternative Livelihood and Community Mining Program, which sought to diversify sources of livelihood in mining areas. But because of widespread government corruption among national and local officials, their implementation was unsuccessful.¹⁰ Therefore, Chinese miners' *galamsey* continues.

Economic and Environmental Impacts

Chinese investors bought up plots of lands from local farmers and landowners and replaced farmlands with gold mines. Farmhands lost their jobs, and overall food production declined. In addition, the influx of Chinese miners increased housing prices, which in turn led to an increase of homeless people.¹¹ Lastly, Chinese miners introduced technologies such as dredging and advanced excavators, replacing low-tech, traditional mining techniques, increasing productivity and making it difficult for Ghanaian small-scale miners to compete with them.

The use of advanced technology has also polluted remaining farms lands and rivers nearby with dust, cyanide and mercury.¹² Major rivers such as the Pra, Ankobra and Birim—essential for supplying water in Western and Eastern Ghana—have been polluted by mining runoff.¹³ This pollution has depressed farm productivity and the livelihoods of people who depend on farming. In addition, the consistent use of mercury in gold extraction has also harmed people's health, which in turn has made them unable to work and earn a living.¹⁴

Community Security

An increase in robberies, violence, and other criminal activity accompanied the influx of Chinese miners. Attacks on Chinese migrants increased as local resentment grew. In response, the Chinese miners acquired weapons to protect themselves.¹⁵ Some became involved in the illegal buying and selling of arms.¹⁶ In many mining communities, the use and trafficking of narcotics also increased.¹⁷

Some observers worried that the loss of local livelihoods and the increase in security problems were bound to multiply locals' grievances, thereby making communities vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups. Violent protests have on occasion broken out over grievances in local mining communities in Ghana.¹⁸

Impact on Women

The majority of women in Ghana's small-scale mining communities work on cocoa farms under abysmal conditions. Many supplement their meagre farming incomes by working in illegal mines. Often, women force their children to work in the mines to help supplement the family income.¹⁹ Women's weak economic standing has made them quite dependent on *galamsey*, and government crackdowns on Chinese illegal mining have hit them hard.²⁰ Although the government has acknowledged women's economic vulnerability, its efforts thus far have not been directed toward reducing women's dependency on illegal mining.²¹

The arrival of Chinese miners has also led to increased prostitution and sexual exploitation and abuse. Some women provide sexual favors to miners in exchange for money. In so doing, they expose themselves to arrest, as prostitution is illegal in Ghana. As a result, they become vulnerable to extortion and corruption. Equally worrisome is the sexual abuse of women employed by Chinese miners.²² These women, as well as their children, are discriminated against and ostracized by local communities.²³

Government Responses

Prior to 2013, the Ghanaian government paid little attention to the proliferation of Chinese migrants in the small-scale mining sector. Although the government did pass the Minerals and Mining Act in 2006, the law was undermined by corrupt officials taking bribes from Chinese miners to allow them to continue mining.

When news media began reporting on *galamsey* issues in 2013, the government felt pressure to respond. President John Mahama established a task force made up of military personnel and other state security forces.²⁴ The task force was instrumental in deporting over 4,500 Chinese miners and the seizure of mining equipment, but it also attempted to curtail illegal mining by Ghanaians.²⁵ During presidential and parliamentary electoral campaigns in 2016, however, the Mahama government held back on enforcement against Ghanaians due to pressures from some communities that threatened to vote against it for attempting to stop them from working in *galamsey* mines.²⁶

After Mahama's electoral defeat, the new government under President Nana Akufo-Addo nonetheless sought to reinforce the ban on illegal mining. In 2017, an Inter-Ministerial Committee on Illegal Mining was set up to deal with the problem.²⁷ The new government also launched Operation Vanguard, which deployed 400 military and police officials in centers of illegal mining.²⁸ An Alternative Livelihood and Community Mining Program is also in place to train those previously involved in small-scale mining for work in other sectors. All have failed to curb illegal mining.

Obstacles to Curbing Galamsey

The lack of government success in curbing *galamsey* is due to a variety of reasons, key among them are the corruption of government officials and heavy-handed crackdowns by the security forces. Other reasons include a weak judicial infrastructure and complicit local populations that directly benefit from illegal mining.

Corruption. Some task force officials and local police take bribes to “look the other way” and thus reap the benefits of illegal mining.²⁹ Chinese miners boast about their “good working relationships” with local police. Indeed, Chinese miners who are caught and detained are usually let go after they pay fines and are thus free to resume their illegal activities. The lack of law enforcement transparency around who is arrested and released makes it difficult for civil society actors to protest or counter illegal mining. On occasion, prosecutions of Chinese miners have been halted without reasonable justification and their seized equipment returned to them.³⁰

Weak enforcement of anti-*galamsey* laws and complicit officials make combating corruption particularly difficult. In January 2020, the Ministry of Environment, Science, Technology and Innovation, which has oversight over the *galamsey* issue, revealed that about 500 excavators seized from illegal miners had gone missing, calling into question the vigilance of local authorities in policing the *galamsey* problem.³¹ Miners have relocated to more remote areas where authorities are less likely to discover them. This move “underground” to wait it out shows that the security forces’ vigilance waxes and wanes, making efforts to combat illegal mining inconsistent and, therefore, ineffective.³²

Violence. Crackdowns by security forces have led to violence without effectively containing illegal mining. Both the Ghanaian and the Chinese communities have suffered the repercussions of this violence. Children and minors have been targets of violent raids. A 16-year-old Chinese boy was shot while fleeing a crackdown by Ghanaian forces.³³ Families in China worry about family members who have been targeted in crackdown operations, as they receive no communication from Ghanaian authorities when their children or siblings are jailed or killed.³⁴

Some aggrieved local authorities have incited young Ghanaians from the mining communities to engage in violence. In April 2020, a group of youth in eastern Ghana, with the support of a local assembly, set ablaze mining equipment belonging to Chinese miners and put the lives of many community members at risk.³⁵

The ineffectiveness of government efforts has angered many local residents. In October 2016, some residents in Western Ghana violently demonstrated against Chinese miners, vandalizing government buildings and other infrastructure.³⁶

Because miners carry cutlasses, shovels, and other mining equipment as weapons, they have been ready to attack at the slightest misunderstandings with communities or law enforcement officials, increasing the violence of attacks. Illegal miners have also armed themselves to protest closures of some illegal pits, causing panic and insecurity.³⁷

Weak Judiciary. Those arrested on *galamsey* charges typically face minimal consequences. Beyond the problem of bribery, the legal and judicial process is slow. Thus many who are arrested post bail and quickly return to the field.³⁸

Local Complicity. *Galamsey* provides ready income for many local people, much more than what farming offers or even compared with the government’s initiative on alternative livelihoods.³⁹ Thus some individuals would rather sell land for *galamsey*, work in *galamsey* fields, or protect perpetrators by failing to report their activities. In some cases, community members clash directly with security forces seeking to prevent *galamsey*.⁴⁰ Chiefs and family heads and custodians of communal and family lands in Ghana have seen large plots of land go to the highest bidder: foreign miners with no interest in sustainable mining to preserve the environment for future generations.⁴¹

In sum, illegal mining has not ceased despite some government efforts. Miners have become more likely to conceal their activities, however, making it more difficult for authorities to curb their activities or find other solutions.⁴² Ghanaian communities, meanwhile, have become more dependent on illegal mining, exposing them to violence and destitution.

The Role of Civil Society

CSOs can play an important role in curbing the proliferation of illegal Chinese mining activities in Ghana and alleviating its negative impacts on communities. CSOs have the standing to reach both the government and the people and can strategically position themselves as mediators.

Local civil society groups have been instrumental in pressuring the Ghanaian government to take action on illegal mining.⁴³ Ghanaian CSOs have publicized the impact of *galamsey* on the environment and community security. They have worked to rehabilitate mined-out or degraded lands, and they have provided legal aid to those affected in *galamsey* communities while holding the government to its promises to curb *galamsey*.⁴⁴

One such CSO, the Media Coalition against Galamsey, has been pressuring the Akufo-Addo government to take action. To promote reforestation and rejuvenation of *galamsey* sites, the nongovernmental organization Partners of Nature Africa initiated a project to plant rubber-tree seedlings on degraded land at a mining site at Peminanse in the Asiwa District of the Ashanti region.⁴⁵ CSO Tropenbos Ghana has been helping local communities rehabilitate mined-out lands and teaching them to integrate good farming and settlement practices around the mining sites.⁴⁶ The Centre for Public Interest Law provides courtroom representation and other legal services to those affected by mining operations and to those contending that the government or illegal mining operators encroached on their rights.⁴⁷

Recommendations

Despite the meaningful work CSOs have been doing to curb and mitigate the effects of illegal small-scale mining, there is more to do: involve the affected communities in awareness raising, dialogue with the government and international community, create attractive alternative employment opportunities, and provide safe places for those who are physically or mentally abused. Moreover, the international community and the Ghanaian and Chinese governments should vigorously support the activities of CSOs.

Raising Awareness. One of the most important roles civil society can and should continue to play is to raise awareness regarding issues related to illegal mining. CSOs can raise awareness about environmental and security issues that may discourage local people from engaging in illegal mining. They can convene hearings and meetings for local people and government, including law enforcement officials, where all parties can raise issues and work toward resolving them. NGOs can appoint community mobilizers to talk to people, record their complaints, and present the results to government officials.

Dialogue with the Government and Local Officials. It is imperative that CSOs in Ghana engage the government in sustained dialogue on mitigating illegal mining. It is only through proper communication that people in affected communities will be able to understand the government's perspective. While it may be difficult to prevent officials from taking bribes or becoming involved in corrupt activities, CSOs can highlight the corruption that does come to light and encourage transparency and accountability.

CSOs should increase efforts to engage local governments. Local officials are directly involved in the communities and sometimes facilitate illegal activities for profit. Engaging local government officials—and appealing for central government and law enforcement intervention where necessary—will increase accountability and transparency.

Programs to Develop Alternative Employment Opportunities. Civil societies can work with the local and central government officials to develop other opportunities for those who have lost their livelihoods due to illegal mining. Local and international NGOs working in Ghana should continue to offer skill-building training programs. It should prioritize women and men from marginalized backgrounds, female and single-headed households, people with disabilities, and others who may have a harder time coping with the loss of livelihood. These programs could help discourage criminal or extremist activity.

CSOs that advance alternative employment opportunities in Ghana's mining regions may also be able to prevent or reduce violence. Targeting female-headed households for alternate employment programs will help reduce the burden on women who are forced to work long hours in mining while also caring for children. Accountability and transparency mechanisms and other initiatives should supplement these efforts, and CSOs are in a key position to establish them.

Safe Houses. CSOs, including religious groups, should establish safe houses for survivors of assault, rape, or other gender-based violence. These organizations must also connect survivors of violence to appropriate services such as hospitals, counseling, police, and lawyers.

Transnational Advocacy. CSOs have immense potential to build transnational and regional advocacy networks. CSOs in Ghana should ally with CSOs elsewhere to jointly pressure their respective governments to resolve problems stemming from illegal mining. Civil societies can also press countries to take the matter to the United Nations, which can encourage the international community to devise solutions.⁴⁸ For example, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation have supported CSO efforts to rehabilitate mined-out lands, providing resources for rehabilitation projects in *galamsey* areas.⁴⁹

Conclusion

This policy brief proposes peaceful means for curbing Chinese *galamsey* in Ghana through greater reliance on CSOs. Forceful curbing of *galamsey* will only lead to more violence and abrupt loss of livelihoods. Grievances will increase, aggravating the challenges communities already face.

The government's ban on illegal mining and violent crackdowns are compounding the problem while failing to tackle it systematically. The problem of Chinese illegal mining in Ghana is both serious and complicated. It secures livelihoods for some and destroys it for others. It creates dependencies, incites violence, reduces security, and severely depletes natural resources. By bringing together all stakeholders—the local mining communities, the Ghanaian government, and international actors—we believe mobilizing CSOs will help Ghanaian communities address the problem holistically.

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