



IMPACTS OF ILLEGAL MINING (GALAMSEY) ON COCOA PRODUCTION IN GHANA (PART I)

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2026/01/14

Across Ghana's forest regions, cocoa farms stretch like a living map of family history. Many farmers walk through their fields and point to trees planted by their forebears. Cocoa is not just a crop; it is the story of survival, dedication, and generational sacrifice. For decades, it has served as a source of livelihood and anchored rural communities in dignity. Today, in the same cocoa regions of Ghana, such as the Western North, Ashanti, Ahafo, and Eastern, the landscape is undergoing rapid changes. The once-deep green canopy of cocoa farms now sits alongside wide, raw wounds carved by excavators. The sweet smell of fermenting cocoa beans mixes with the harsh smell of diesel and polluted water from illegal mining sites.

As the world's second-largest cocoa producer and Africa's largest gold producer, Ghana relies on these two sectors as the cornerstones of its economy and primary contributors to its national GDP, yet this foundation now faces an existential threat from galamsey, which has devastating consequences for both the environment and human lives.

Galamsey is not just about digging for gold, but also about the destructive methods, which include using excavators and toxic chemicals like mercury and cyanide that leach into soil and waterbodies. Research confirms that environmental degradation in Ghana's mining sector is not exclusive to illegal mining operators. While illegal "galamsey" is often highlighted for its devastating and unregulated impact, academic studies and environmental reports also document significant ecological destruction caused by legally authorized large-scale and small-scale mining companies (Emmanuel et al., 2018; Usman Kaku et al., 2021). Cocoa matters to Ghana due to its revenue generation and being the backbone of rural Ghana, supporting over 800,000 smallholder farmer families. It's a source of national pride and a key export commodity. This two-part article will expound on how Galamsey is destroying the very foundations of cocoa farming in Ghana, the threats to the environment and food sovereignty, as well as the lessons this struggle holds for peasant movements globally.

Mining in Ghana

The mining industry in the country is characterized by a dual structure where operations are conducted on both a large scale and artisanal and small-scale (Aryee et al., 2003; Yankson & Gough, 2019). Capital-intensive transnational corporations typically dominate large-scale mining, while artisanal and small-scale (ASM) mining is labour-intensive.

Artisanal and Small-scale gold mining is one of the oldest indigenous livelihood activities that existed in the country for many centuries; it has been in existence since the 4th century (Ofosu-Mensah, 2010). In Ghana, the artisanal and small-scale gold mining sector has been a significant contributor to approximately 40% of the country's gold production in recent years (Owusu et al., 2019). In addition, the sector also employs close to 60% of the labour force that is into the extraction of precious minerals in the country (Hilson and Osei, 2014). Despite these contributions from Ghana's ASM sector,

miners' operating practices prioritise economic gains over environmental and social implications. The proliferation of illegal mining operations is inextricably linked to severe environmental degradation. Despite concerted efforts by state and non-state actors to formalize the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector since 2017, illicit mining persists as a primary livelihood strategy for a significant segment of the Ghanaian population. Boadi et al. (2026) and Owusu et al. (2019) argue that the failure of regulatory institutions to sanitize the ASM sector of Ghana has culminated in massive degradation of land and water resources.

While Large-Scale Mining (LSM) provides the state with essential foreign exchange, scholars like Darimani (2013) and Okyere et al. (2021) point out a stark inequality: a vast majority of the financial assets are expatriated by multinational firms, while the host communities are left to manage the long-term environmental and social costs of the concessions. Besides, hasty labour retrenchment and underpayment of indigenous workers by large-scale mining corporations remain a major topical issue (Yankson and Gough, 2019). Emphatically, massive acts of plundering, pillaging, displacement, and conning are tactically advanced, denying the peasant landlords of their share of mining proceeds (Hilson and Yakovleva, 2007). Even in situations where displaced residents are due to be compensated, these compensation regimes are mostly complicated with deceit, leading to inimical compensation arrangements and dispossession of the rightful owner of the land (Kidido et al., 2015).



Illegal mining pits in cocoa farms at Kunsu in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Source: The Cocoa Post

Causes of Illegal Mining Activities

It is imperative to note that illegal mining persists because every stakeholder seeks to benefit (Baddianah et al., 2022). Illegal mining in Ghana is driven by deep-seated historical and structural factors. Both colonial and post-colonial legislative frameworks prioritized large-scale foreign investment, systematically marginalizing indigenous miners. This exclusion was further intensified by neoliberal economic reforms, such as the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which incentivized foreign capital at the expense of local land rights. Consequently, as host communities receive negligible benefits and inadequate compensation from large-scale concessions, artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) has emerged as a critical—albeit illicit—livelihood strategy in response to systemic poverty and unemployment.

In addition, formalization efforts of local miners have largely failed due to the top-down legal reforms, which ignore local community needs and participation. As well as the high costs and bureaucratic barriers that prevent miners from legalizing their operation. Illegal mining also persists due to weak institutions as well as political interference (Baddianah et al., 2022).



Illegal gold mining operation, or "galamsey," in Ghana. Workers excavate a deep, muddy trench, disrupting the soil and landscape critical for cocoa cultivation. Source: CISA Newsletter

The Importance of Mining, and Its Painful Contradictions

While mining is a vital pillar of the Ghanaian economy and a source of livelihood for many, it must be conducted with deep respect for environmental integrity and human life. The devastating impact of illegal mining, however, stands in direct contradiction to these values, showing a blatant disregard for our land, water bodies, and communities.

Mining occupies a complicated space in Ghana's rural economy. On the one hand, gold is a major national asset. Mining generates revenue, provides employment, and attracts investment. In many parts of Ghana, mining is woven into the fabric of local life; some families depend on small-scale mining as much as others depend on cocoa farming. For young people who feel excluded from national prosperity, mining appears as the only doorway to financial independence.

The importance of mining is also where its contradictions lie. Legal, regulated mining can support development, yet illegal mining tears it apart with its destruction of water

bodies, land, and affects the health of human lives. Many miners enter galamsey because they see no real alternative. Youth who are tired of endless job searches and low-paying work join mining teams because it offers instant income. For some of them, galamsey is the first time in their lives that they have held significant money. Mr. Akwasi Fordjour, a cocoa farmer from Kunsu traditional area in the Ashanti region, put it this way: “Cocoa is good, but cocoa cannot buy a plot of land in one year. But with mining, I have built my own house in two months, and can start my life.”

These realities make galamsey difficult to fight, because it is not driven by greed alone; it is driven by survival. But while mining provides short-term gains, its unregulated form destroys the land, rivers, and the farms on which future generations would depend.

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