



Photo Credit: Ruth McDowall, featured in Detecting Gold Mining in Ghana, NASA Landsat Image Gallery.

Galamsey and the Struggle for Ghana's Future: Environmental Degradation and the Resistance Movement

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The West African nation of Ghana is endowed with natural resources such as water, forests, and substantial deposits of high-value minerals including gold, diamonds, bauxite, and manganese. As a tropical country, Ghana enjoys a significant amount of sunshine to support the development of solar power. It also has an ample wind system and biomass base. Taken together, these renewable and nonrenewable resources make Ghana a resource-rich nation.

As is the case with most countries that abound with natural resources, in recent years Ghana has seen a dramatic rise in the deterioration of its natural resources primarily caused by small and medium-scale artisanal mining, popularly called “*galamsey*.” The term is a corrupted version of two words “gather and sell,” which connote the gathering and selling of gold. This practice has led to environmental degradation, land and water resource depletion, health hazards for miners, and social and economic impacts.[1] There is also medical evidence suggesting that *galamsey* activities have resulted in new health challenges including neonatal defects that are traceable to unregulated heavy metals like arsenic and mercury that have found their way into groundwater systems through illegal alluvial mining.

Protests, Media, and Government “Action”

The broad scale of *galamsey* has led to massive protests. Despite occasional arrests of protestors and their leaders, the resistance to illegal mining continues on all fronts engage various strategies. For instance, an activist, Oliver Barker-Vormawor, went on a hunger strike after he was arrested by the police, leading to hospitalization. His case was widely publicized in the media, both locally and internationally. The primary goal of the protesters has been to highlight the environmental deterioration arising from illegal mining, encourage their fellow citizens to rise against *galamsey* in their communities, and compel the political leaders to stop the menace. At the heart of protests is the awareness that environmental protection is not a one-sided obligation, and that the government and citizens are bound by constitutional obligations to protect the environment.[2]

Alongside protests, the media consistently churn out stories to draw attention to the undesirable developments surrounding *galamsey*. In 2017, the major print and electronic media outlets in Ghana formed a media coalition on illegal mining. A defining feature of the media campaign in the early years was to showcase samples of water taken directly from rivers and streams affected by *galamsey*. This approach shocked Ghanaians across the country since water from these previously pristine rivers and streams had turned to different shades of brown, depending on the level of pollution. The sustained media campaign resulted in a wave of concern and agitation across the country, which fueled additional protests, with popular musicians composing catchy songs that became anthems for protestors.

As the destructive *galamsey* continued unrestrained, and its effects became increasingly visible in many communities, even communities that were profiting from this illegality began to question the value of this enterprise. Particularly, young people who became more aware of the hazards of illegal mining on the present and future generations continued to protest in the streets using non-violent action. Civil society groups did the same. Police arrests sparked outrage from the general populace, underscoring the pressing issues. Now it is quite common in Ghana to see videos online of community members chasing out mining operators from their communities or destroying illegal mining equipment.

Despite the poverty and seeming powerlessness of communities affected by illegal mining, they are beginning to rise up. The consistency of civil society activism and media exposure have greatly contributed to this level of awareness. Also, the effects of environmental degradation have become so tangible that they cannot be simply ignored. People can no longer drink from their water bodies because they are muddied and laced with chemicals like mercury. Illegal mining operations have cut off access to farms, food crops cannot grow optimally because of damage to the land, and diseases like kidney failure, birth defects, and cancer are being reported.

Between 2017 and 2023 the government of Ghana declared a war on galamsey. Joint police and military operations including Operation Vanguard, Halt II, and Halt III, were used in attempts to address this issue. These operations were touted as the measures that would definitively end illegal gold mining in the country. However, digital media has exposed politicians through news stories, audio, videos, and documents, as significant enablers of the menace for their financial gain. These politicians reportedly influenced these operations to address galamsey and made them ineffective. The print and electronic media exposed these problems to Ghanaians, chronicling many of the powerful people in high places who were only paying lip service to the menace in public while participating in it privately.

Common Themes

The galamsey phenomenon has common threads irrespective of where it occurs in Ghana. These issues are reflected in the living conditions of local people who are recruited to engage in the illegal activity because of their poor economic conditions. Many Ghanaians, especially youth, are compelled to do it because of unemployment, poor education, lower living standards, and fewer alternative livelihoods. Generally, galamsey is practiced in villages, surrounding forest reserves, and riverine communities where farming is the main occupation. The youth have been discouraged from farming because of bad roads from farms in the rural areas to markets in the urban centers. The truth is that money is hard to come by, making it easy for vulnerable young people to turn to galamsey because it is lucrative.

In contrast, the owners and financiers of galamsey are powerful members of society who usually live in cities or away from the mining sites and turn a blind eye to the environmental degradation so long as they benefit financially. They keep foreign prospectors and their machines protected and find ways to quell dissent within the communities. While the government has banned these extractive machines from being imported into the country, the illegal miners have contrived clever schemes to get them into the country. They do this by disassembling the machines and reassembling them after they sneak them into the country. Despite news of the destruction of these machines in what has been termed “anti-galamsey” operations, the activity continues.

Finally, some believe that chiefs who are the traditional leaders and custodians of natural resources for present and future generations have been complicit. These chiefs have denied the claims. The discourse has contributed to increased vigilance by community stakeholders in their efforts to protect the environment.

Legal Framework

The legal framework's impact on enforcing the ban on illegal mining remains to be seen. Galamsey is now entrenched because those who engage in it continue to evade the legal process. Law enforcement is bound to be ineffective in the face of the complicity of political leaders.

Several laws regulate mining in Ghana, including the Minerals and Mining Act of 2006 (Act 703) and its amendments. Environmental policies exist including a National Climate Change Policy, National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, and National Environmental Policy all geared towards engendering a safe environment for the health and well-being of present and future generations. Ghana has also signed and ratified international treaties like the Minamata Convention^[3] (to phase out/ minimize mercury use). The country collaborates with international organizations including the United Nations Development Program in attempts to ensure that sustainable development is not hindered by environmentally destructive activities like galamsey. Despite all these, the practice continues. A new Environmental Protection Act, 2025 (Act 1124) has just been passed to strengthen environmental protection, with stricter penalties for violations and non-compliance. It is yet to be seen how this new statute will address illegal mining, one of the major contributors to deforestation, the prevention of which is at the heart of Ghana's climate change policy.

Conclusion

Although protesters' efforts in the fight against galamsey are laudable, the complicity of "powerful" people is the main barrier to ending this destructive practice. For people living in vulnerable mining communities, the battle to protect their environment is an uphill task. The social, economic, and political outlook needs to change if the protests against this illegal and destructive activity are to yield meaningful results. Perhaps a paradigm shift is what is needed – a move away from the trappings of greed, money, and illicit wealth at the expense of the environment and present and future generations. A return to traditional African customary norms that fundamentally place value on humans' stewardship role in the environment and eschew the wanton destruction of nature presents a viable pathway to returning Ghanaians to their cultural roots.^[4] For instance, the traditional Akan adinkra symbol "Asaase yeduru," which translates to "the earth has weight," references the sanctity and divinity of the Earth for the sustenance of all life. It embodies the duty to preserve the environment through responsible stewardship. These Akan concepts and similar traditional religious and cultural symbols command a deep reverence for nature but have now been eroded by commercial interests. A return to them is necessary.

f Ghana is to attain its goal of progressing from its lower-middle-income status, the indiscriminate destruction of the environment must end. Without a healthy environment, development cannot be sustained. At the very least, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights guarantees the rights of all to a generally satisfactory environment favorable to their development.^[5]

[1] See generally S. A. Ofori, et al., An ecological study of galamsey activities in Ghana and their physiological toxicity, 2 Asian J. Toxicology, Env't, & Occupational Health 40–57 (2024).

[2] Article 36(9) of the Constitution of Ghana, 1992 provides: “The State shall take appropriate measures needed to protect and safeguard the national environment for posterity; and shall seek co-operation with other states and bodies for purposes of protecting the wider international environment for mankind.” Article 41(k) also provides that it is the duty of every citizen “to protect and safeguard the environment.”

[3] The Minamata Convention on Mercury, initiated by the United Nations Environment Program (UN Environment) Governing Council in 2009, was adopted by 147 governments on January 19, 2013 in Geneva, Switzerland. Ghana became a signatory on September 24, 2014 and ratified the treaty on March 23, 2017.

[4] See generally Godwin Eli Kwadzo Dzah, Sustainable Development, International Law, and a Turn to African Cosmologies (2024).

[5] Article 24 of The African Charter provides that “All peoples shall have the right to a general satisfactory environment favourable to their development.” African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights art. 24, June 27, 1981, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982).



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