

The Negative Effect of Legal Mining (Gather Them and Sell) in Ghana

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Abstract

Small-scale mining was once a respected traditional vocation. When the government officially legalised the practice in the late 1980s, it brought to the fore some challenges, including the mechanism by which the government granted mining concessions to peasants. The process was cumbersome and slow and therefore forced many people to mine illicitly. Today, illegal mining, popularly known as 'galamsey,' has become a major source of livelihood for persons living around legal mining communities, mainly due to the continuous rise of the price of the commodity on the world market. The activities of illegal small-scale mining operators have been identified as the major source of water pollution in mining communities, especially in the Western Region. At Nkroful in the Ellebelle District and Wassa Amenfi East District, both in the Western Region, activities of small-scale miners are a major problem, threatening the health of the people living in those communities who depend on the polluted water-bodies for their domestic use. However, the district agencies whose duty it is to monitor and enforce the laws do not have adequate capacity to enforce the laws, and have therefore failed in the execution of their monitoring and supervision roles. Indeed, the environmental effects and other demerits of small-scale mining operations *prima facie* look overwhelming. But a holistic and dispassionate look at the real issue might tempt one to side with the sentiments of the small-scale miners. It is important however to distinguish between the licenced small-scale miners, who have been licenced under the small scale Gold Mining Law (PNDC 218) now replaced by sections 81 to 99 of the new Minerals and Mining Act, 2006 (Act 703) and the illegal operators, popularly referred to as galamsey operators. The small-scale miners have no mining equipment that will prevent water-bodies from getting polluted, yet the Minerals Commission continues to issue operating licences to them. Mining experts describe small-scale mining as being similar to illegal mining due to the method both miners use to extract their gold. Experts further state that galamseyers are people who do gold mining independently for mining companies using crude methods such as digging pits, tunnels and sluices with their hands.

Keywords: Galamsey, Gather & Sell, Illegal Mining

1.0 INTRODUCTION

A galamsey, derived from the phrase "gather them and sell", is a local Ghanaian term which means illegal small-scale gold mining in Ghana; such workers are known as galamseyers or orpailleurs in neighboring francophone nations. Galamseyers are people who perform illegal gold mining independent of mining companies, digging small working pits, tunnels, and sluices by hand. It is said that the word galamsey is derived from the phrase "**gather them and sell**", which is what these artisanal miners do to survive. In practice, a small-scale mining operation in Ghana is based on a land plot measuring less than 25 acres. There are however other indicators like work output and equipment used, which the Minerals Commission refuses to inspect before it makes recommendations to the ministry of lands and natural resource. In Ghana the small-scale mining industry is reputed to be well over 2,000 years old and is still being treated as an informal industrial sector, even though the sector employs thousands of people who use largely rudimentary, unmonitored and uncontrolled practices which are not monitored by the environmental protection agency. Small-scale mining activities in Ghana remained unregulated, and therefore the government does not receive any revenue from their operations.

Generally the galamseyers can dig only to a limited depth, far shallower and smaller than commercial mining companies. Under current Ghanaian law, it is illegal for galamseyers to dig on land granted to mining companies as concessions or licenses. Most galamseyers find gold in free metallic dust form or they process oxide or sulphide gold ore using liquid mercury. The number of galamseyers in Ghana is unknown, but believed to be from 20,000 to 50,000. They mostly operate in the southern part of the country where there are substantial reserves of gold deposits, usually within the environs of the larger mining companies. As a group, they are economically disadvantaged; galamsey settlements are usually poorer than neighboring agricultural villages. They have high rates of accidents and are exposed to mercury poisoning from their crude processing methods. Many women are among the workers, acting mostly as porters for the miners.

In some cases, galamseyers are the first to discover and work extensive gold deposits before mining companies find out and take over. Galamsey workings are an indicator of the presence of gold. In the francophone countries surrounding Ghana, similar local artisanal gold miners are called orpailleurs.

2.0 NEGATIVE EFFECTIVE OF “GATHER THEM AND SELL”

On November 13, 2009 a collapse occurred in an illegal, privately owned mine in Dompoe, in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. At least 18 workers were killed, including 13 women, who worked as porters for the miners. Officials described the disaster as the worst mine collapse in Ghanaian history.^[1] In addition, the dangers of galamsey in Ghana are not only limited to the health related issues faced during the illegal mining but also include the external damage caused to the land and water bodies.^[2] In March 2017, the Minister of Lands and Natural Resources, Mr John Peter Amewu, gave the galamsey operators/illegal miners a three-week ultimatum to stop their activities or be prepared to face the law. Generally, many social commentators and environmentalist have advocated for a stricter regime to flush out the activities of illegal miners.

Destructive floods in parts of the country recently were blamed largely on the activities of illegal miners. It is also feared that illegal mining activities could have serious repercussions for the safety of the formal mines and the environment as a whole. Illegal mining for example, affects the geological balance of other mines. “Illegal miners have shifted their activities to the Adansi Shaft Pillar, a rock that serves as a support system to keep the shaft on its feet,” noted John Owusu, AngloGold Ashanti (AGA) Corporate Affairs Manager has stated. In Ghana, many sociologists extend the scope of damage that mining can produce to include potentially adverse impacts on society and cultural heritage and the health and safety of mine workers.

Great risks to the miner’s life: There are regular incidents of a pit may caving in and burying miners alive. Siaw summarised, “It is not an easy job, sometimes people go down there and do not return. At other instances we do not get anything and that is why there is a lot of theft in this area.” Yet, these deadly trends are not ones that deter people from descending into the earth’s deep shafts in search of ore bearing rocks. Their motivation is attached to a desperate need for income. Anytime lives are lost in the mines, those who survive are able to potentially secure more minerals for themselves. The mine operators are rather spurred on to engage in their illegal activities by such accidents.

The Obuasi mine of AngloGold Ashanti, according to management, is under threat by the activities and operations of illegal miners. The activities of these illegal miners have heightened the insecurity in the area for their employees as the illegal miners have resorted to the use of sophisticated weapons to protect their operations. “It is worrying the manner in which the illegal miners competed with company workers underground, using offensive weapons like cutlasses, clubs and guns to put fear in the legitimate miners. There have been several occasions where AGA workers resisted going to work, because of the risky environment created by these illegal miners”, said Mr. Owusu. The government in collaboration with multinational mining companies has on several occasions expressed worry about the trend of galamsey operations in the country and has tried alternative ways to wean practitioners off their dangerous trade by introducing alternative livelihood schemes in all mining communities.

However, this approach seems to do little to discourage adventures into the pits especially when gold prices have resumed their surge. Alternatively, there have been calls on the government and mining companies to release concessions to the illegal operators since these adventurous miners are now impacting formal concession arrangements without the mining company reaping any benefit. Illegal mining is creeping dangerously close to the mining company’s areas. Whatever solution is adopted, it is clear that the root of the problem is a mix of social and economic considerations. Low income, lack of regulatory enforcement, perverse incentives to avoid obtaining official land concessions for mining, as well as a lack of education on environmental issues has morphed into a very hazardous practice in Ghana’s mining sector. The government and civil society must put their hands to the wheel to fight it otherwise legitimate private sector operators may be deterred from investing in the sector which is one of the chief foreign exchange earners in the economy.

Devastating effect of illegal mining: Initially one may only think that it is the surface soil which is being destroyed but there is more to it like pollution of water bodies. Institutions, charged with the protection of the environment such as the Minerals Commission, Environmental Protection Agency and Forestry Commission seem to be overwhelmed by the strength and threat of illegal miners. It is therefore alarming to hear reports that cocoa and cashew farms in some parts of the country are allegedly being sold out for illegal mining activities. This situation will obviously affect the production of cocoa, one of Ghana’s major economic crops. River bodies are not being spared by illegal miners. For instance, the Tano River which is the main source of water for more than 60 percent of the population of Brong Ahafo region is bearing the brunt of illegal miners. Communities like Dormaa Akwamu, Kenyase, Nkaseim are also under similar threats.

3.0 FIGHTING ‘GALAMSEY’ AND RIVER POLLUTION IN GHANA

One phenomenon that has received a lot of attention and discussion on media and other platforms is illegal small-scale mining popularly referred to as ‘galamsey’. The subject matter has been discussed widely in view of the

immediate and long-term effects on the environment, agriculture, habitat and livelihoods as a whole. The concern has been that if these illegal mining activities are allowed to persist, it will have dire consequences for the sustenance of livelihoods in the communities affected by these illegal mining activities. Though 'galamsey' affects many facets of life, one area in which its impact is being felt most is the pollution of rivers and water bodies. The extent to which rivers have been polluted exerts significant pressure on individuals who live near and depend on river bodies as source of drinking water and livelihood. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, a river is a wide flow of fresh water across the land into the sea, a lake or another river. Pollution on the other hand is damage caused to water, air, and humans by harmful substances or waste. Thus, river pollution can be said to be the act of adulterating river bodies with harmful substances such as industrial waste, oil and grease, washing at the banks of rivers, amongst others.

'Galamsey' does not only pollute rivers and other water bodies but also leaves death traps for miners themselves and other individuals. There were reports in 2015 that showed that 'galamsey' operations in the East Akyem District were polluting the Birim, Densu and Ayensu rivers which served as sources of water for communities in those catchment areas. In spite of the negative effects of illegal mining on rivers and other water bodies, many communities in the rural areas, due to lack of alternative sources of water, tend to use the same polluted rivers without any fear. They drink, cook, bath and perform all tasks with the polluted water in spite of the risk of contracting diseases such as cholera, dysentery, fever, amongst others. The pollution of rivers also has significant effects on the activities of the Ghana Water Company in its mandate to provide safe drinking water to Ghanaians. For instance, a few years ago the Ghana Water Company shut down a water treatment plant due to the fact that chemicals used for treating polluted water had become expensive. The company also had to shut down its water treatment plant at Kyebi for one-and-half years due to the pollution of the Birim River.

There have been statements by representatives of government, NGOs, environmentalists and traditional authorities on the dangers that the 'galamsey' menace poses to the sustainability of livelihoods for communities affected by these illegal mining activities and the nation as a whole. In 2014, the Project Officer for Friends of the Nation, an NGO, Mr. Solomon Kusi Ampofo, appealed to communities living along the Bonsa River in the Tarkwa Nsueam Municipality in the Western Region to fight against illegal mining operations in the Bonsa River. In April this year, a Deputy Chief of Staff, Mr. Jonny Osei Kofi also called for stakeholder efforts to end illegal mining which has had an adverse effect on potable water supply in the country. The worrying issue is that statements on the adverse effects of illegal mining have not yielded the results we expect as the 'galamsey' menace continues to plague many communities. The time has come for more decisive action to be taken by all to confront the 'galamsey' issue head-on. This is particularly important if the country is to achieve some of the goals outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which replaced the MDGs in September 2015. The SDG framework outlines 17 goals which the UN hopes nations of the world can achieve by 2030. For instance, goals 6, 11 and 13 focus on clean water and sanitation, sustainable cities and communities, and climate action respectively but how can these goals be achieved by 2030 if the wanton destruction of the environment is allowed to continue through the activities of 'galamsey' operators?

The recent report carried by the October 20 edition of the *Ghanaian Times* newspaper in which 'galamsey' operators in Obuasi went on rampage destroying offices, posters, banners and billboards of the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP) is cause for concern. The report indicated that the illegal miners chanted "no galamsey, no votes". If this is not the height of impunity, then I do not know what else is. The time has come for government, civil society, NGOs, traditional authorities and well-meaning Ghanaians to move away from the rhetoric and take more decisive action to stem the 'galamsey' menace which threaten our survival and our ability as a nation to achieve the goals outlined in the SDG framework by 2030. The fight against 'galamsey' is a fight for survival.

4.0 GALAMSEY MENACE: CAUSES, EFFECTS AND SOLUTIONS

The high incidence of "galamsey" or illegal mining in recent times, have been on several discussions and heated debates for some time now and has perplexed the minds of the general public in Ghana. Each day various analysts of various dispositions are found expressing their views on this disturbing menace in newspapers, television, radio, internet and magazines. Each year, illegal mining strips some 28 billion tons of material from the earth. This is more than what is removed by the natural erosion of all the earth's rivers. Worldwide, mining generates an estimated 2.7 billion tons of processing waste each year. Mining (galamsey) could also cause more damaging deforestation than bad farming practices in certain parts of the country, Ghana. In a quest to know more, I have visited some mining sites at Nkaseim, Kenyasi, Wuramumuso, Mehame, and Banda, all in the Brong-Ahafo region to be specific and so many areas across the country to witness the devastating nature of galamsey to the community. Extensive studies conducted on the galamsey phenomenon estimate that half of those employed in galamsey operations in Ghana, are the youth, women and children representing one of the highest in the world as well as our able-bodied men.

Mining has been poorly regulated in the country even in the remote areas. While government subsidize mineral production, few enact or enforce strict environmental regulations for mining operations. As a result, not only are mining activities more environmentally destructive than need be, but prices of minerals do not include their full environment cost. Today's low mineral prices reflect only the immediate economics of extraction and distribution. They fail to conduct the full costs of eroded land, demand or polluted rivers and displacement of people unlucky enough to live on top of mineral deposits. Virgin land are destroyed without giving the kowtow to the future generations.

It is in the light of this rampant nature of the menace and the growing concern of the general public that I humbly appeal to you for a space in your esteemed newspaper to air my views on the causes and effects of these galamsey acts and suggest ways which could be taken to check the occurrence of these devious acts. The factors that combine to trigger someone involve in this illegal mining are easy to identify. One major cause of this devilish act is the burning desire for material things. It is always the ambition of most young men and women to get rich quickly in order to obtain whatever is fashionable. Such people would want to dress gorgeously, own mansions ride the latest cars, have access to modern sets of furniture and become millionaires at a point. Devoid of the milk of human-kindness, it is not surprising to find these people attacking the defenceless "Virgin lands".

The lack of employment opportunities in this country is a contributory factor to this situation. The absence of job facilities in our towns, cities and villages has compelled our able-bodied young men and women to join some of the foreigners (not to mention of the Chinese). It is very disheartening to find university graduates, qualified trained nurses and midwives, professional laboratory scientists, etc. making frantic efforts to search for jobs that do not exist. Most heart-breaking is that the few lucky ones who find jobs are not well paid. Each blessed day, in the name of economic reforms and structural adjustment programs, people are thrown out of jobs. Those who finds themselves in this unfortunate situation become frustrated and are unable to sustain themselves. They need to earn a living and have access to necessities of life. Thoughts of survival compel these men and women to consider galamsey as a lucrative venture that is worth exploiting.

One major cause of this menace in the country is our ailing economy, which is incapable of supporting the skilled worker. Inflation is high, and the prices of goods are simply unaffordable. It is very difficult for workers who are poorly paid and do not enjoy incentives to make ends meet. They do not enjoy free or low cost medical care, accommodation, water and electricity and this makes it extremely difficult for them to perform their social responsibilities. They are unable to provide three square meals a day for their children, let alone provide them their necessities and education. Most disheartening is that they live in empty rooms. Their desire to acquire the comforts of life remains a dream. For these parents to live a Huggermugger to disgrace or failure, they are haunted by thoughts of involving in galamsey which could serve them greener pastures.

In addition, the political status quo in our country does not encourage professionals to stay and work permanently with their skills and competencies acquired through their education and training permanently. There have been so many volatilities, and whenever there is change in government, it is our professionals who suffer prejudicially. The adverse and horrendous effects of galamsey are quite obvious. We do not need a seer to sooth say that our country is in danger of collapsing, if the country's fertile land and resources are misappropriated through galamsey practices. It is crystal clear evident that putting square pegs in round holes would lead to mismanagement and total breakdown of our fragile economy. If the country continues to leave her natural resources to foreigners, this will intensively cast a slur on the nation's image.

4.1 Effects of Galamsey on Education

The effects of galamsey on education are as numerous as factors that engender it. To break the ice, the aftermath of this mining is a hostile and disorderly environment, which is incapable of promoting sound academic work. Eventually, brilliant and gifted students who could have blossomed into scholars of repute to take charge of the affairs of the country, end up underground (pits) searching for gold as destitute. Also, galamsey in school going children and the youth, if unchecked, grows to destroy the moral fiber of our society, since the youth constitute the soul and blood of the nation. The idea of acquiring money within a simple means has been the motivation behind the children engaging in the illegal mining activities in the mining communities. Most of the young people in such communities do not value the significance of education; hence, choosing galamsey over education. A report by Daily Guide on May 4, 2015 with the headline "Pupils Abandon School for Galamsey" reflected that, indeed galamsey has become the biggest factor to hinder the children from enjoying their right to education. It was revealed in the report that, many children of school going age have abandoned classrooms and are now into full scale illegal mining activities, in view of the cash benefits that come with these activities, despite the associated risks.

Moreover, the enrolment figures in most basic schools in the district Daily Guide observed were sharply declining as pupils had put on hold their plans to pursue formal education to chase quick money (Read the story here:

<http://www.dailyguideghana.com/pupils-abandon-school-for-galamsey>). These children, ignore the negative impact of this illegal mining activity and rather concentrate on how and ways to engage in this activity to search for gold.

Most of them also imitate their siblings and other elderly people who are also seen ignoring school to do galamsey. On the other hand, the existence of the illegal mining has gotten to the level where even candidates who are about writing an exam that can guarantee them entrance to the secondary school abandon the exams for galamsey. According to rawgist.com, four candidates writing the 2015 Basic Education Certificate Examinations (BECE) at the Mensonso D/A Junior High School (JHS) in the Adansi South District of the Ashanti Region have abandoned their examinations to engage in illegal Mining activities popularly called galamsey. It was estimated that, out of 253 who registered for the examination, 248 candidates were present as the four male students were said to have abandoned school to join their colleagues at the galamsey pits. (<http://rawgist.com/2015/06/16/candidates-abandon-bece-for-galamsey-activities>). One can analyse that, most of these young children have not yet understood the significance of education; hence resulting in low attendance of school and low participation in educational activities in the mining communities.

4.2 Effects of Galamsey on Health

I wish in a nutshell to state that health is an indispensable asset for human of life and development. In observing the important contributions health makes to the nation, no society can simply afford to deny any section of its people access to health. The practice of galamsey activities in the country involves their crude and wasteful methods provide one of the stiffest challenges to public health. It involves water use methods and alluvial mining techniques that cause devastating pollution of rivers, streams and lakes. Toxic chemicals such as mercury that have long term health implications on communities for generations are released into these water bodies. The use of these heavy metals to pollute surface and underground water has severe health implications that would not manifest immediately but in the near future. Mercury dispensed through the activities of illegal miners in the form of mercury vapor and the pollution of surface and underground water are highly toxic to humans. According to the Ghana Health Service, mercury, which is a heavy metal and one of the chemicals used by illegal miners in their activities, had a dire effect on the health of humans, as it could cause the breakdown of the central nervous system.

Galamsey activities expose Ghanaians through drinking and inhaling of gaseous mercury, which is absorbed into the blood. Once in the circulatory system, it can pass through the blood-brain barrier and accumulate in the brain, damaging the central nervous system. Also, the consumers of pipe-borne water may be consuming small amounts of mercury and unknown to the public, bits of it would accumulate and give negative effects in the not-too-distant future. Aside those who drink treated water, millions of Ghanaians live along the banks of these river bodies and fetch the raw water, which is heavily contaminated with chemicals such as mercury and arsenic, for domestic use. For most people, mercury use is the only means of extracting gold. While many are aware of the effects of these poisonous substances, the immediate economic needs that can be satisfied through its use outweigh the risk.

4.3 Effects of Galamsey on the Environment

The environment is the home of all living and non-living creatures. The biophysical environment is the biotic and abiotic surrounding of an organism or population, and consequently includes the factors that have an influence in their survival, development and evolution. This environment encompasses the interaction of all living species, climate, weather, and natural resources that affect human survival and economic activity. People living in these artisanal environments faces climatic change due to the nature of the work, bad weather conditions and the almighty degradation of the natural resources that disturb human survival and pecuniary activities. The public cry and fear for this menace is the destructive nature of the environment which if unattended can lead to a desert country in the near future to emanate. There is no qualm that galamsey activities have caused a great harm to our environment, this is because most of the minerals are found in rivers, as a result, the illegal mining companies often resort to slating of rivers and their surroundings to enable them access to the targeted gold or minerals. This is done without caring about the consequences and dangers this may have on trees, birds, animals, and even individuals in the various communities.

Deforestation, is a major part of the damages galamsey causes to the environment. It involves the clearing of the forest leading to cutting down of trees, to enable them accomplish their operation, of extracting gold. These illegal pit workers also do not put in place any measures that will safeguard them from taking risk. With the fact that the illegal sappers are mostly unskilful, they also use unprotected tools and equipment making them a big threat to the nation. I would endeavour to put forward the following measures to curb the high incidence of this act in our country. To control this disturbing situation, the government should, as a matter of urgency establish more jobs and improve the service conditions of workers. This artisanal incidence cannot be looked when the factors that influence it is not tackled. The causes are the main problems and it should be well patterned.

Also, strenuous efforts should be made by the government to revive the country's ailing economy and make living conditions better to ensure sanity in our nation. If the economy is improved, parents will be in a better place to provide

all the basic needs of their children and give them access to quality education. Lest I forget, the government should ensure that the stringent laws governing our natural resources must be set to motion. I fervently appeal to the government to pass a law to deter some irresponsible and greedy people whose primal desire is to sacrifice the country's natural resources for self-satisfaction. Further steps should be taken to ensure the security recruits made to protect lands and the other resources.

Moreover, religious institutions are called upon to nurture their children to strive against this art. As a matter of urgency, there should be social and religious mobilization and sensitization drives in all cities, towns and villages throughout the country to explain to their members the need to stay away from gamamsey. Once again, our political and traditional leaders should hold their tongues and refrain from making flippant remarks to the public. They aimed at being innocent from these artisanal acts but are the backbone of the canker. Which people are responsible for giving lands for people to operate on? Save us now or never. It is my keen hope that the suggestions that have been given would be carefully considered to eliminate this unpleasant situation in Ghana.

5.0 CONCLUSION

One thing Ghanaians should bear in mind is that the continuous operations of illegal miners in the country will have more destructive effects on the entire nation than an ordinary mind can fathom. One health hazard is the effect of dangerous chemicals used by illegal miners. We should know that the life of one Ghanaian is precious than hundreds of ounces of gold. It must be made clear that gamamsey operations come with some moral and social problems. These are open prostitution by girls between 10 and 15, abuse of alcohol, illicit use of marijuana and other hard drugs like cocaine and heroin. Incidence of armed robberies, falling educational standards in the affected communities and blatant disregard to laws, order and customs are exhibited at the highest levels. It should be noted that when gamamsey is not checked, land is degraded and food production decreases. The effect of illegal mining on economic crops which gives the nation a sustained means of foreign exchange cannot be quantified. Our Security Agencies, Environmental Agencies, Chiefs, Political Leaders and all well-meaning persons should rise up and stop any attempt to destroy the nation in the name of gold.

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