

**ACADEMIC WRITING SAMPLE**

**THE DESTRUCTIVE IMPACTS OF ILLEGAL MINING ACTIVITIES ON  
GHANA'S FOREST ECOSYSTEM AND COMMUNITIES**

**BY**

**YAW DARKWAH AMOATENG**

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## **1.0. Introduction**

Mining has made significant contributions to Ghana's economy, establishing itself as a key sector in the country's development. It has attracted foreign investment, driving economic growth and providing employment for the youth, particularly in rural areas. However, with the emergence of heavier equipment that offers greater hazards to vegetation cover in the forest, mining has now been made worse by worldwide interest and the introduction of what is known as Galamsey (Illegal Small-Scale Mining).

Although mining plays an important role, it is considered illegal when conducted without a permit or in prohibited areas such as forest reserves, game reserves, or near water bodies (Ross, 2002). Since the emergence of Galamsey, there have been several reports on the widespread destruction of forests, along with significant habitat and biodiversity loss resulting from mining activities.

Deforestation in Ghana is accelerating at an annual rate of 3%, driven by various forest crimes, with illegal mining being a significant contributing factor (Gyamfi et al., 2021). To regulate this destruction, the Ghanaian government legalized artisanal and small-scale mining, requiring applicants to follow specific regulations to obtain a concession. However, ineffective policies and bureaucratic obstacles obstructed the formalization process, leading more individuals driven by poverty to turn to illegal mining. This has led to a widespread environmental destruction. Many forest reserves throughout the country have experienced severe land degradation and extensive loss of vegetation cover, all because of activities of illegal small scale miners.

## **2.0. Environmental and Societal Impacts of Illegal Mining**

Illegal mining in Ghana, predominantly known as Galamsey, has surged over the past decade, leaving a profound and lasting impact on both the environment and local communities. While agriculture and logging have historically been the principal drivers of deforestation, the devastation caused by illegal mining activities is more catastrophic (Cristescu et al., 2012). What began as an economic lifeline for those in rural areas where formal employment is scarce has escalated into a crisis that is steadily dismantling the nation's

natural wealth. Riverbanks and water bodies, have been transformed into toxic wastelands contaminated with mercury, cyanide, and other hazardous chemicals.

Despite the existence of the Minerals and Mining Act (2006), which legally requires environmental impact assessments and land reclamation initiatives for all mining endeavors (Asiedu, 2013), illegal miners blatantly flout these regulations. As a result, Ghana's landscapes are increasingly destroyed by expansive pits and decimated forests.

At the early stages of the 20th century, Ghana boasted a lush forest cover of 8.2 million hectares, but today only 1.6 million hectares remain (Boadi et al., 2016). In just five years, illegal mining had degraded 2.5 km<sup>2</sup>, approximately 4.4% of a forest reserve in two Ghanaian communities (Boadi et al., 2016), showing how significant a role it plays in the reduction of forest covers in country.

The deforestation crisis is most severe in Ghana's Western Region, where illegal mining accounts for a staggering 40-50% of deforestation, with up to 70% of forest reserves affected. This is due to the presence of gold deposits in the area and widespread poverty. There have been reports of a significant shortage of once abundant Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) such as snails, mushrooms, medicinal plants, and herbs in the area, resources that are critical to the livelihoods of local community members. Communities that once thrived on these resources are now struggling to adapt, as years of unchecked mining have rendered previously abundant goods scarce.

Water resources have also been affected by these small scale miners. Waterways have not only dried up but also become reservoirs of pollution, causing water shortages and devastating nearby vegetation. This compounds the dire consequences of climate change, leading to elevated evaporation rates and further resource depletion. The environmental devastation wrought by illegal mining is particularly evident in forest reserves and major rivers such as the Pra and Offin, which have been heavily polluted (Boafo et al., 2019).

This ongoing environmental destruction is already driving many species toward extinction. The loss of forest cover has wiped out critical habitats for wildlife, leading to dwindling populations of species that depend on these ecosystems for survival. The contamination of water bodies further disrupts aquatic life, causing fish kills and endangering species that rely on clean water. Without immediate and effective action, this downward spiral could lead to the complete disappearance of many species, forever altering Ghana's biodiversity. Worse yet, these reports only scratch the surface of the ecological collapse, hinting at far more devastating impacts that have yet to be fully realized.

Due to these alarming trends, one must question the government's ability to control the situation and ask "Can the government truly combat this issue, or is it just making matters worse?"

## **2.1. The Government of Ghana and Illegal Small-Scale Mining**

Despite efforts by the Ghanaian government, the battle against illegal small-scale gold mining, or Galamsey, remains an ongoing and formidable struggle. The legal framework established by the 1989 Small-Scale Gold Mining Law (PNDC L I 218) was intended to regulate the sector and enforce environmental protection guidelines (Yeboah, 2012). Yet, over three decades later, illegal mining remains widespread.

Over the past two decades, illegal mining in Ghana has transitioned from rudimentary artisanal practices in a more organized industry largely driven by foreign investors, notably from China (Boafo et al., 2019). These investors have introduced heavy machinery such as bulldozers, excavators, and crushing equipment, escalating the scale and impact of mining operations (Boafo et al., 2019). According to a 2018 report by the Minerals Commission, small-scale mining now constitutes 43% of Ghana's total gold production, highlighting its significant economic contribution (Minerals Commission, 2018). Yet, the environmental repercussions are devastating. Prioritizing economic gains through destructive mining practices jeopardizes both the integrity of Ghana's critical ecosystems and the future of the Ghanaian populace.

The government has launched several high-profile interventions, including Operations Vanguard, Halt, and Galamstop, to address the escalating crisis of illegal mining and protect Ghana's forests and water bodies (Yeboah, 2012). These efforts follow earlier initiatives such as the 2006 military-led Operation Flush Out, which aimed to remove illegal mining activities from designated sites (Yeboah, 2012). Despite these measures, the effectiveness has been limited. Illegal miners resume their activities shortly after government crackdowns and continue to exploit the environment (Boafo et al., 2019).

Recognizing the need for a broader approach to address the socio-economic drivers of illegal mining, the government introduced alternative livelihood programs such as the Youth in Afforestation Programme and the National Alternative Employment and Livelihood Programme (NAELP) (Yeboah, 2012). These initiatives created sustainable employment opportunities in areas like reforestation, agriculture, and legal mining, hoping to reduce reliance on illegal activities. However, the persistent allure of illegal mining remains strong. Many miners opt to continue with these illicit practices because they offer faster and higher financial returns, despite the associated risks (Boafo et al., 2019).

Task forces tasked with arresting offenders, seizing equipment, and deporting foreign miners have also struggled to make a lasting impact. Although the government has designated forest reserves and water bodies as red zones for mining, illegal activities persist unchecked, undermining national efforts to achieve sustainable development goals (Boafo et al., 2019).

Compounding these challenges is the troubling involvement of politicians in the illegal mining trade. A study by Yeboah, (2012), revealed reports that indicated that influential local figures, including some politicians, played a role in shielding illegal miners from prosecution. Political interfered with some officials reportedly using their positions to protect illegal operations.

The pervasive influence of political and economic power in the illegal mining sector presents a more formidable obstacle to the Ghanaian government's efforts to eradicate Illegal small-scale mining. The

struggle against illegal mining is not just an environmental challenge but a complex battle against entrenched corruption and power dynamics that continue to undermine the country's progress.

### **3.0. Conclusion and Recommendation**

Illegal mining in Ghana is an environmental catastrophe in the making, with effects that ripple far beyond the immediate landscape. Contaminated water systems and vanishing forests are not isolated phenomena but interconnected crises that demand urgent attention. The environmental degradation unleashed by Galamsey represents one of the gravest threats to Ghana's future, yet it is a story that remains far from finished. As more land is ravaged and water supplies polluted, the full extent of this ecological and societal disaster may take generations to fully understand, let alone repair.

Although the government's efforts have led to some short-term gains, they have failed to address the underlying socio-economic drivers that fuel these activities. The economic allure of Galamsey remains strong due to poverty, lack of viable alternative livelihoods, and inadequate policy enforcement. Therefore, while tackling illegal mining requires stricter regulation and more effective enforcement, it also demands long-term strategies that tackle the root causes of the problem. If the economic motivations that are driving illegal mining are not addressed, Ghana's forests, water bodies, and communities will continue to face significant environmental threats. **Back this up with research**

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