

# The Impact of Illegal Mining on the Ghanaian Youth: Evidence From Kwaebibirem District In Ghana

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## Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of illegal mining on the Ghanaian youth, using Kwaebibirem district in Ghana as a case study. The prominence of this activity in the district triggered the researchers to undertake this study to expose some of its effects on the youth in the district which include destruction of farms, pollution of rivers and destruction of educational infrastructures. Using a case study approach, the research work used interviews, observations and documentary sources to obtain data for the study. In addition, the researchers toured some of the mining areas such as Akwatia, Kade, Wenchi, Topremang, Apinamang, Takrowase, Adankrono and Soabe (all towns in the Kwaebibirem District of Ghana), to acquaint themselves with the activities of the miners and how these affect the youth. Finally, the researchers contacted Chief Nursing Officer of Kade Government Hospital and Educational Officers of the statistical division of Kade Education Office to interview and had discussions with them over the attitudes of the youth towards school before and after “their illegal mining activities”. The research through the sources identified above showed that poverty, ignorance and get rich quick attitude of the youth have been identified as the motivational factors for illegal mining activities in the Kwaebibirem District. It also showed that illegal mining activities have negative impact on the youth in relation to high rate of student turnover, increase in teenage pregnancy, disrespect towards the elderly and engaging in undesirable behaviours such as smoking of hard herbs. The study gives its main recommendation as the need for the government of Ghana to put measures to discourage the youth from illegal mining activities if the country wants to reap full benefits from these youth in the future in terms of their potentials.

**Keywords:** Illegal mining, gold, diamond, youth, inhabitants, Ghana

## 1. Introduction

Small scale mining in Ghana generally refers to artisanal mining of precious minerals particularly gold and diamonds. It should be noted that, other industrial minerals like salt, sand, gravel, granite, quartzite, clay, kaolin are also mined on small scale basis in Ghana. Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) in developing countries is a largely poverty-driven activity. It is a practice that involves rudimentary techniques of mineral extraction, highly manual processes, hazardous working conditions, and frequently negative human and environmental health impacts (Barning, 2002). An estimated 80–100 million people worldwide are currently engaged in this industry and directly or indirectly depend on it for their livelihood (Petra and Kamini, 2007). While ASM has the potential to contribute to poverty reduction, it often perpetuates poverty through high sensitivity to physical hazards, illness, and accidents, and lack of knowledge about more efficient, safer, and environmentally friendly techniques. These factors tend to keep miners trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and vulnerability (Dawkins, 2005; Kesse, 2006). In Ghana, ASM mostly of diamond and gold has expanded dramatically in recent years. The country is currently Africa’s second largest gold producer after South Africa, with gold exports accounting for more than 40% of total export earnings (Berger, 2008; Airo, 2009). Over the past ten decades, Ghanaian gold production from ASM activities has risen

tenfold and doubled since 1998, accounting for an estimated contribution of \$461.1 million to the national economy since 1989 (Yakubu., 2000). Researchers have found ample evidence to suggest that small-scale artisanal mining in Ghana started some 2000 years ago. It was the mineral wealth of ancient Ghana which made the ancient empire of Ghana in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. According to them, Portuguese sailors who first visited Ghana in 1470 were bewildered at the amount of gold dust, nuggets, and ornaments found in the country and had to name it the Gold Coast appropriately (Afrenya 2002). The forefathers of Ghana mined gold and diamond on small scale before the white man arrived on the shores of Ghana as noted above. The gold was used as ornaments especially in the Ashanti Kingdom (one of the kingdoms in Ghana), for barter and as a treasure. Diamond and gold mining has been practiced in Ghana since the pre-independence era. In diamondiferous areas like Akwatia, the forefathers of Ghana used diamond to decorate their rooms and headgear. The mining was done along the banks of rivers and streams by digging out gold and diamonds bearing gravels and panning to recover diamonds, gold nuggets and gold dust. It is well known among the Ghanaian public that exportation of precious minerals such as *gold, diamond* and *manganese* forms the second highest foreign-exchange earner to Ghana apart from cocoa but it is believed that the way and manner these minerals are being mined in the various communities in Ghana cause more harm than good to the inhabitants especially the youth. Furthermore, it is believed that the illegal mining activities have been affecting standard of education among the youth in the communities and as such reducing enrollment in Ghana schools. (Daily Graphic number 13861 Wednesday 28/6/1995 issue)

Looking from these two problems identified above, one is tempted to investigate the impact of illegal mining on the standard of education in Ghana as well as the inhabitants of those in the various communities where this practice tends to be dominant.

## **2. Local dialect and terms commonly used in illegal mining in Ghana**

'*Galamsey*' is the local dialect used to describe the activities of illegal mining in Ghana. Ghanaians started using this term in the western areas of Ghana such as Tarkwa and Awaso. From the statement of an old time miner whom the researchers had discussions with, the term was coined from the statement '*gather them and sell*'. It actually became popular in the mid-seventies when the Ghanaian economy began to deteriorate and people started looking elsewhere to supplement their incomes. This type of mining was the most attractive venture because of perceived quick remuneration. Though not internationally recognized, the following are the most common terms used in illegal mining in Ghana:

*Ayaa*: It is a term used to describe a sandy soil which contains diamond. This type of soil is normally found in the short pit which has a depth below two meters.

*Baabode*: It is a term used to describe overburden soil. It is not obvious that 'baabode' contains diamonds but those with diamonds are the loamy type of soil. It is believed that diamonds found in 'baabode' are of poor quality compared to the rest of the soil.

*Laka*: It is a term used to describe a clayey soil which contains diamond. This type of soil is normally found in a long pit which can extend to a depth of above four (4) meters. Diamonds found in 'laka' are always fine and of best quality among all the types of soil.

*Carat*: It is a unit of measure. One (1) carat = 0.2g. Diamonds are priced in carats and sub-division of the carat.

*Pound*: It is a unit of measure of gold. 40 carats = 1 Pound.

*Boart*: The lowest grade of diamonds normally black and charcoal – like.

### **3. How illegal mining is done in Ghana**

Since this type of mining is illegal, it normally takes place under cover of darkness (at night) or at a hidden place such as forests, existing farms, river beds, valleys and remote locations. This is a job that needs no education, qualification or experience. It is patronized by all categories of persons who are physically strong; men, women, children, teenagers and even the aged engage in the winning of diamonds.

Manual and traditional methods are practiced by the illegal miners. Simple tools or materials like pick-axes, shovels, barrels, head pans, sticks, sacks and nets are used. The miners in groups of three to five dig holes along the banks of rivers and streams, collect diamondiferous gravels (soil) with sacks, pour them into barrels and then use sticks and water to wash away the smooth sand from the stones. Perforated metal containers (normally referred to as 'Top') are used for the separation and the sands are collected for further treatment. Jigs (a wooden rectangular tray with net below) are used to pick the diamonds from concentrates in the jig.

### **4. Methodology**

The main objective underlying the study is to investigate the impact of illegal mining on the Ghanaian youth using the Kwaebibirem district of Ghana as a case study. In collecting data for the study, the researchers used mainly observation and interviews although other documentary sources were also used to collect data for the study. With regard to the observations, the researchers visited Akwatia, Kade, Wenchi, Topremang, Apinamang, Takrowase, Adankrono and Soabe (all towns in Ghana where illegal mining is done) to observe how this activity is done in those areas. The choice of these areas was based on the fact that it is noted to be one of the most common areas where the youth engage in illegal mining. Interviews were also conducted with 10 illegal miners each from only two towns among those visited above (Akwatia and Kade) by using convenience sampling. The choice of this type of sampling was based on the willingness of the illegal miners to talk to the researchers since they were afraid that any information released by them will be used to prosecute them in future. The assurances given by the researchers enabled them to get 10 illegal miners each from the two towns to be used for the study. The interviews conducted centered on why they engage in illegal mining and assuming if they had to choose between going to school and engaging in illegal mining; which one of them will make their life better in future. Interview was also conducted with the Chief Nursing Officer of Kade Government Hospital to find out the effect of illegal mining on the female teenagers in the town with emphasis on teenage pregnancy. Secondary data was also collected from the Education Office in Kade in relation to student turnover rate. The data was analyzed and together with the observations and interviews conducted, conclusion was drawn with regard to the impact of illegal mining on the youth in Ghana.

### **5. Presentation and discussion of findings**

The study found out that although 'illegal mining' started long time ago, those who were involved were mostly adults and it was then believed that the job was meant for Northners (one of the tribes in Ghana) since they were believed to be strong. In view of this, the youth and for that matter school children in Kwaebibirem district at that time were regular and punctual at their respective schools since they did not find it expedient and profitable to engage in that activity. The study through the interviews with the illegal miners found out that that illegal mining got to its peak in 1983 when the Ghanaian returnees from Nigeria arrived in Ghana. Before that time, the youth were regarding education as the only means for survival. As a result of that, both the parents and their wards directed their attention to acquiring quality education with the view of securing better occupation. The parents and guardians encouraged their wards to attend school every day, as they did their best to provide them with their basic needs. Records from Kade Education Office in Ghana (Table 1) shows that the rate of school dropout in two towns ( Kade

and Apinamang) is on the high side. For instance in Akwatia (one of the towns in the district), out of a total of 88 students enrolled, only 42 were able to complete. The total percentage of school dropout was 52.27%. In terms of Apinamang which is also one of the towns in the Kwaebibirem district, the percentage dropout was 42.28%. Interviews conducted with 6 illegal miners who were among the dropouts from school gave their main reason as lack of support from family members to finance their education. They believe that with the illegal mining, it gives them all the money they need to start life. Looking at the responses of these illegal miners, the researchers were of the view that the dropout from school of illegal miners is due to the high premium they place on this illegal activity as compared to education. Talking about the attitude of the youth from 1980s up to present where illegal mining has become common among the youth in the districts selected for the study, it was revealed through the observations by the researchers that the youth and for that matter school children attitude towards school changed when they get involved in illegal mining as they begin to get money from diamond and gold prospecting. Some of them through observations have become disrespectful and put up behaviours which go contrary to school regulations. It also came to light that after illegal mining, the youth tend to be truants preferring diamond and gold prospecting to school. For instance, a visit to one of the Junior High Schools in Ghana (Apinamang Junior High School) revealed that not more than two-thirds of the enrolments have attended school even a single day since the beginning of the 2009/10 academic year. Furthermore, it was also gathered that some teachers also involved themselves in illegal mining activities and as such absent themselves frequently from school. In view of this, those children who always come to school and hear about the teachers' absence tend to play truant since they find no need to come to school while the teachers are not around. Other observations made by the researchers also revealed that educational infrastructures are affected as a result of this illegal mining. As it has been already stated, illegal mining normally takes place at night. In view of this, the illegal miners take the opportunity to do what they like without taking into account whatever is on the land if only they find out that there are deposits of precious minerals. In this vein, school environments are destroyed. For instance, notwithstanding the vast and possibly rich area for prospecting diamonds in Akwatia (one of the towns in the district selected for the study), the people in the town have virtually removed the soil around the Anglican primary school (one of the primary schools in the district) to prospect for diamond. With regard to illegal mining and its effect on the inhabitants, observations revealed that farmlands have been destroyed as illegal miners destroyed them in prospect of gold or diamond. This can be evident from Figure 1 which shows illegal miners busy destroying farmlands for diamonds and gold. Other rivers in the district used for the study such as river Birim and streams in the district shows very high levels of contamination by bacteria which is a major cause of diarrhea disease.

Interviews again conducted with the illegal miners revealed that because the work of illegal mining is difficult, they need to take in some drugs which will serve as catalyst or stimulant. Thus, the youth tend to take in drugs like alcohol, marijuana, cocaine and other hard drugs to enable them work hard for longer periods. Eventually, some of them become addicted to the drugs and become social "misfits" thus increasing the rate of school dropouts in the district selected for the study. Immoral activities are also one of the effects of illegal mining among the youth in the district. As they get money from the illegal mining, they use it to influence the female to have sex with them which normally leads to teenage pregnancy. Statistics gathered from Kade Government Hospital which is one of the hospitals in Ghana (Table: 2) shows that teenage pregnancy had increased since the male youth have enough money through the illegal mining to influence the female youth by having sex with them. For instance, out of 1,468 of the number of birth deliveries recorded at Kade Government Hospital, 260 teenagers representing 18% was included in

this number. Interviews conducted with the Chief Nursing Officer at the hospital indicated that most of these teenagers who delivered at the hospital had their husbands engaging in these illegal mining activities. This means that the money these illegal miners get from gold and diamond prospecting enable them to have the edge to influence these female teenagers to sleep with them which at the end of the day results in unexpected pregnancy. In choosing between engaging in illegal mining and education; which one of them will make their life better in the future, 14 out of the 20 illegal miners prefer to engage in this type of activity rather than going to school. Though they gave different reasons for their choice of illegal mining over going to school but majority of them focus their reason on the fact that education is a long way of getting rich in the society since it will take them more than 10 years starting from Nursery to University before they can get good wage employment in Ghana. With this, they believe illegal mining offers them the quick money they need which will make their life better in future. Looking from the majority of the respondents who assigned this reason for their choice of illegal mining over education, they are ignoring the fact that illegal mining cannot be done for a very long period of time taking the fact that the work is too physical and as time goes on they cannot engage in this type of activity anymore. Second, external environmental factors like political such as change of government can bring stringent policies that will make illegal mining impossible in the country. From this response, it is therefore necessary for more education to be done on the benefits of choosing school over this kind of illegal activity.

## **6. Conclusion**

The study concluded by affirming that the increase in illegal mining activities have brought about retrogression in educational sector in Ghana using Kwaebibirem District as a test case and hardship on majority of the people who are farmers as their farms are destroyed by these illegal miners. The increase in teenage pregnancy, high student turnover rate, high levels of truancy and disrespect among the youth are the most common impact of illegal mining among the youth in Ghana. There is therefore the need for chiefs and people in Ghana to re-examine the activities of miners and institute appropriate measures in order to preserve cultural values and ensure that development now and in the future is geared towards long-standing benefits to the society in general.

## **7. Recommendations for the study**

In view of the negative impacts that illegal mining is having on the educational development in particular and general life of the youth in the Kwaebibirem district, the following recommendations have been made to help arrest the situation and restore the balance in the social life of the people:

- Parents and guardians should constantly be educated on the need to provide the needs of their children and wards to ensure that they are restrained from immediate prospective economic activities which tend to hinder achievement of educational goals.
- The traditional communities and the District Assemblies in Ghana should as a matter of urgency, institute sanctions against parents who neglect their responsibilities towards their children.
- Ghana Education Service (GES) should try as much as possible to employ experts in Guidance and Counselling in every school to guide and remind the pupils/students of the long-run effects of truancy and the indulgence in anti-social and immoral activities.

- Again, the Guidance and Counselling Co-ordinators should organize lectures on career guidance for the youth in schools to explain to them what their fully utilized educational and academic potentials can help them become in future. Programmes must be undertaken in these schools to help students know their areas of excellence and must be guided into what vocation they can enter and the possible prospects available to them since the Ghana Labour Act 2003 prohibits the engagement of minors in mining activities
- In addition, persons who employ young children (minors) for mining activities should be brought before the traditional authorities.
- There should be regulative and monitoring measures to ensure sound and environmentally sustainable mining practices. This is because pits dug by illegal miners pose great dangers to the inhabitants.
- Ghana Consolidated Diamond (GCD) Limited under whose area the concession falls should try as much as possible to rehabilitate mined lands by refilling them with the spent laterite and soil excavated during prospecting before handing them over to the communities.
- Ghana Education Service should do well to employ security personnel especially night security men to take care of school properties in the mining areas. This will go a long way to prevent illegal mining workers from destroying educational infrastructure.

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Table 1: Student enrollment and completion rate within Akwatia and Apinamang in 2011

Akwatia						Apinamang					
Enrolled			Completed		% Drop out	Enrolled			Completed		% Dropout
School	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls		School	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
Akwatia Methodist	17	20	5	14	48.65	Apinamang LA	24	17	14	9	43.90
Akwatia LA	6	10	5	2	56.25	Apinamang Presby	19	20	14	13	30.77
Akwatia Amanfrom	13	22	10	6	54.29	Apinamang R/C	21	22	14	7	51.16
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>52.27</b>		<b>64</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>42.28</b>

Source: Kade Education Office

Table 2: Teenage pregnancy rate recorded at Kade Government Hospital

Year	Number of deliveries	Teenagers	% of teenagers
2003	553	70	13
2004	568	66	12
2005	580	78	13
2006	514	88	17
2007	581	81	14
2008	803	137	17
2009	1,228	157	13
2010	1,270	212	17
2011	1,468	260	18

Source: Kade Government Hospital

Figure 1: Miners busy destroying farmlands for diamonds and gold



Source: Researchers fieldwork, 2012

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