

Reflections on social impacts in the extractives sector/ASGM in Africa



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Context: The Role of Small-Scale Gold Mining (SSGM)

Gold mining in Uganda is more than an economic activity - it's a story of survival, conflict and transformation.

- ASM is a critical **livelihood strategy**, globally engaging around **seven times** more people than industrial mining.
- In Uganda, the sector is characterized by **formalised** and **regulated** companies and cooperatives (SSGM).
- SSGM is a key economic driver, directly engaging an estimated **250,000** individuals and accounting for over **90%** of Uganda's gold production (TrustAfrica 2024; planetGOLD Uganda 2024) - **Seen as a path out of poverty.**



The Problem: ESIA Ineffectiveness and Systemic Flaws

- Despite its formalization, SSGM remains associated with **significant environmental** and **social harm**.
- ESIA's are required to mitigate risks, but their effectiveness in SSGM projects is still **limited**.
- Undermining intentions - Weaknesses in **governance** and **institutional capacity** undermine the core intentions of ESIA i.e.,
 - 'Do No Harm' (social safeguard)
 - 'Do Good' (social investment, benefit sharing)



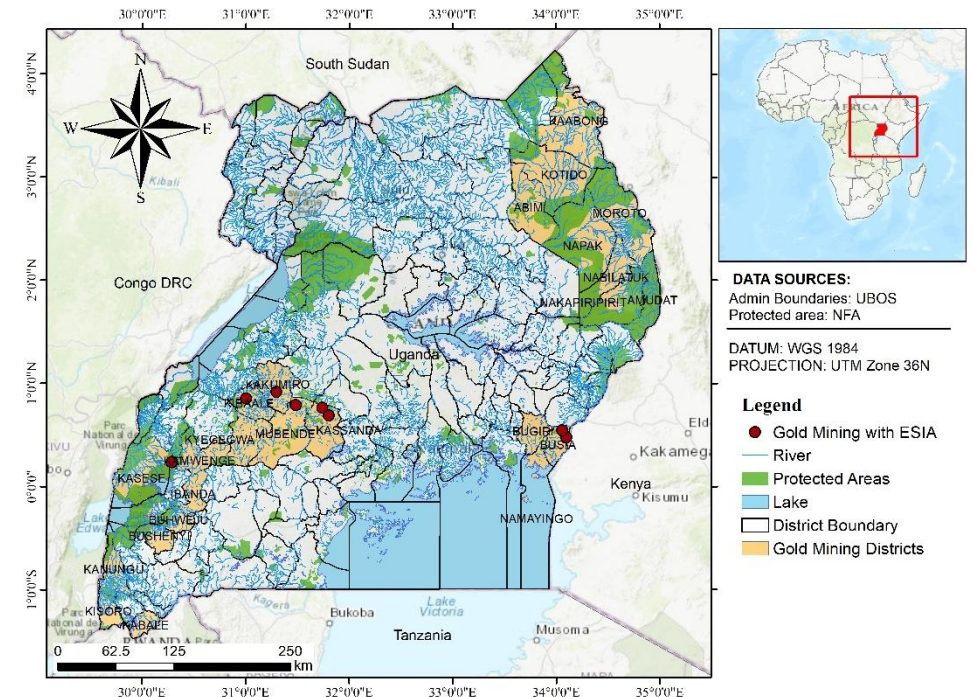
These aren't isolated mistakes. They are symptoms of a broken system.

Research Aim and Methodology

We consider the **formal SSGM sector** in Uganda, examining **how governance** could be improved **to reduce** social and environmental impacts and **increase** benefits to local communities.

Methods (Sept 2024 - Aug 2025)

- **50** expert interviews
- **20** community group discussions (~300 participants)
- **8** ESIA reports analyzed and targeted **literature review**
- **Field observations** in Kassanda District



I listened to miners, farmers, officials, academics and walked the dusty roads of Kassanda. We read the reports and pieced together the story. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2026.101941>

Box 1

Benefits arising from small-scale gold mining projects.

Analysis of ESIA Reports	Literature Review
Creates employment and business opportunities, increases incomes and wealth Source of revenue to the government from taxes, permits and licenses Source of revenue to utility companies and other service providers Stimulates economic growth and increases local wages, reducing poverty among local people Stimulates the local and regional economy Enhances investment opportunities Contributes to improved infrastructure e.g., improved roads, electricity supply Enhances skills development among workers Improves workers' living conditions such as housing due to increased income	Creates jobs and employment opportunities Stimulates local economic growth Enhances national income and enhances livelihoods for millions of people worldwide Contributes to GDP and export earnings Plays a vital role in poverty alleviation Increases access to education, healthcare & other services because SSGM workers and their families benefit from increased income Empowers marginalised groups to participate in the workforce and gain economic independence Fosters social interaction & community building among SSGM workers and the broader community Is a supply of raw material for ornament makers Facilitates economic diversification

Key Sources used to compile Box 1:

ESIAs: Burlcore, 2025; Desert Park Miners, 2025a, 2025b; Oumart, 2023; Shining Mines, 2022; Seven Hills, 2022; Pinnacle Enviro Consult, 2017; Universal Flow, 2025.

LITERATURE: Hilson and Potter, 2003; Bryceson and Jønsson, 2010; Hilson, 2010; Nyame and Grant, 2014; Aloba Loison, 2015; Eduful et al., 2020; Fisher

Benefits of SSGM: The 'Do Good' Potential



Key Findings

We acknowledge that SSGM brings real benefits. It feeds families, builds roads, empowers women and youth. But....

- **Fragmented institutional responsibilities:** Unclear and overlapping duties create tensions between national and local authorities.
- **Weak enforcement:** Local governments lack the technical capacity and resources to properly enforce regulations and monitor projects.
- **Exclusion of stakeholders:** Local people and community leaders are inadequately engaged in planning and decision-making processes.
- **Marginalisation of social science:** Research on social risks is often overlooked in policy development, leading to politically reactive, rather than evidence-based, regulations.



Social Risks Associated with SSGM

The lure of gold and inadequate governance lead to severe impacts on local people.



- **Disruption** to agricultural activities and traditional ways of life.
- Communities are **forcibly displaced** from ancestral lands, often without **adequate or fair compensation**.
- Displacements were reported to be **corrupt**, with elites influencing **land allocation**.
- Displacement **leads to long-term** vulnerability, marginalization, and food insecurity for affected people.
- Increased demand for **land and water** (*especially at gold washing stations*) sparks violent conflicts with local communities, intensified by a lack of clear **property rights**.
- **Illegal trading** and **smuggling** bypass official channels, leading to a loss of government revenue.

Social Risks Associated with SSGM – Cont'd

- **Miners** face risks of injury, fatalities (especially underground), respiratory complications, cancers. Companies do not provide medical insurance.
- **Women**, who make up approximately 45% of SSGM workers, are at higher risk of mercury poisoning because they are predominantly engaged in the gold processing and washing stages.
- **Erosion of communal identity** and **social cohesion** fuels crime, drug abuse, youth unemployment, school dropouts and family disorganisation.
- **Influx of transient labour** causes overcrowding, poor sanitation, increased crime, risks of GBVH, STIs and strained resources.

The cost is not just economic - it's cultural, social, human...

Conclusion: The Need for Stronger Governance

We must challenge the system that devalues our work. Interviews revealed a clear pattern that social science is marginalized.

- Our journey **revealed a broken system** that we must **transform**.
- There is a 'bad mindset' **that academics only produce theory**, not usable, policy-related data.
- Data on **evident social risks** (child labour, health issues, gendered impacts) is available, but **ignored**.
- **Legislation is a starting point**, but institutional capacity and enforcement are the real change agents.
- Regulations become politically reactive rather than informed, evidence-based, **compounding social risks**.
- **This isn't just about Uganda**, it's about ensuring that the benefits of mining (as a vital livelihood), do not come at the expense of human dignity.
- Let's work together to build a **governance model** that truly puts people first.

Recommendations: Government Institutions

Transformation begins with the government itself

- **Formalization & Compliance:** Formalize SSGM through consistent policies, transparent licensing, and effective environmental and social regulations.
- **Harmonization & Ethical Behaviour:** Harmonize national and local regulations and strengthen ethical behaviour among officials.
- **Integrated Approaches:** Integrate gender-sensitive and human rights-based approaches into SSGM decision-making.
- **Capacity & Coordination:** Invest in staff training for social impact management and create inter-agency coordination mechanisms.
- **Land Use:** Ensure participatory land use planning that respects customary rights and embeds accountability for mining concessions.

Recommendations: Private Sector Actors

Must build a Social Licence to Operate, not just creating jobs, but creating sustainable livelihoods...

- **Engagement:** Engage early and continuously with affected communities, traditional leaders and local governments.
- **Risk mitigation:** Conduct thorough ESIA's and establish a transparent and functional grievance redress mechanism.
- **Local development:**
 - Provide local employment and alternative livelihood strategies.
 - Prioritize local procurement and invest in vocational training/safety education.
 - Promote value adding through local gold processing.



Recommendation: Cross-Cutting Priorities

Priorities for development partners and civil society:

- **Equity and inclusion:** Prioritise gender equity and social inclusion; design targeted programs for youth and marginalised groups.
- **Transparency and oversight:** Enhance transparency through open data platforms, independent audits, and multi-stakeholder oversight.
- **Integrated management:** Implement robust Environmental and Social Management Plans (ESMPs) to mitigate cumulative impacts.
- **Adaptive management:** Adopt a participatory, transparent, and adaptive approach to risk management for long-term sustainability.





Let's continue the conversation!

Message me your questions or comments in the IAIA26 app.

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