

# UGAASM

Your voice on Artisanal and Small-scale Mining in Uganda

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## Uganda's ASM Sector: A story of Resilience and Hope

- A miner's journey into the mines
- Government designates artisanal mining zones
- Echoes of Gold: the people, earth, and price of prosperity



# Solidaridad



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**Cover picture:** A miner being hoisted from a shaft at one of the mine sites at MUMA

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# Foreword

Artisanal and small-scale mining, a crucial source of livelihood for millions of Ugandans, and many more the world over, is evolving fast, as countries embrace its significance in socioeconomic transformation for especially developing economies and centrality to addressing many of present day global challenges of climate change and the environmental footprint.

In Uganda, we laud the notable progress the sub sector has made right from government recognition and accompanying legal reforms to regulate and legalise its operations, to its evident contribution in transforming local communities and making the economic numbers count. The recent performance of the local currency against the USD is largely attributed to an increase in gold exports, much of which the source is artisanal and small-scale mining.

Today, we mark an important milestone since artisanal and small-scale gold miners were evicted from the Mubende gold mines in Kitumbi Sub County on August 4, 2017. This event triggered the birth of a national artisanal and small-scale miners' association as a platform to advocate for miners' rights, engage different stakeholders, agitate for reforms and inclusion in the mining sector.

On 26th June 2025, Mubende United Miners' Assembly (MUMA) became the first licensed artisanal and small-scale miners' group to acquire a Small-scale Mining License (SML 00575). MUMA is also the flagship association of the Uganda Association of Artisanal and Small-scale Miners (UGAASM) boasting over 150 associations.

This arduous journey has seen us go over many hurdles; however, pertinent issues in the legal regime remain sticking points. The bureaucratic red tape in the licensing process, particularly, the requirement for environmental and social impact assessments, is an impediment to inclusivity in the sector.

Well-wishing stakeholders have been an integral part of our journey and thus we recognize the following:

The Government of Uganda (Ministry of Energy and Minerals Development; Directorate of Geological Survey and Mines, National Environment Management Authority) that has enabled a working environment for ASMs through formalization and legalisation, zoning mining areas and licensing.

The various civil society organisations that have supported and walked the journey with us. These include: ActionAid International Uganda, Africa Center for Energy and Mineral Policy, Global Rights Alert, Solidaridad East and Central Africa, Global Initiative Against Transactional Organised Crime, UNDP ACP-EU Development Minerals Project, planetGOLD Uganda,

The Parliamentary Committee on Natural Resources and Environment that acted on our pleas for inclusivity, and particular Members of Parliament that amplified our cries for recognition.

The Mubende and Kassanda District Local Government leadership and political leadership of the Resident District Commissioners; and Local Council leadership of the two districts for the unwavering commitment to support our struggle.

The MUMA members who moved tirelessly for the nine months following the implementation of the President's directive vide P.O 22 dated February 6, 2018 for the return of the miners to the mines.

The UGAASM regional coordinators, chairpersons and their executive committees in their mobilization efforts and growing the national association membership.



**John Bosco Bukya**

Chairperson, UGAASM, MUMA







Youthful miners wash gold pellets from a sack.

## MUMA – The flagship miners' association

**M**ubende United Miners' Assembly has a membership of 22 active associations, including an all women-association. Owing to its unenviable position in the eye of the storm during the evictions, their efforts to get organized and licensed were intentional, focused and strategic.

MUMA was benchmarked on two robust miners' movements based in South Africa namely; Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA KZN / Fuleni) and Women Affected by Mining United in Action (WAMUA KZN /Fuleni).

At a conference hosted by ActionAid International Uganda at Ridar Hotel in Kampala on 26<sup>th</sup> June, 2018, miners from southern African countries, shared their experiences in advocacy and participatory inclusion of communities affected by mineral resource extraction.

The first mining license, EL1093, was brokered by State House, through a presidential directive Vide PO 22 dated April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018 off the investors' license. The directive was that MUMA would access 30% of the mining area which was further shared between the Federation of Artisanal and Small

Scale Miners and MUMA in the ratios of 7:3 respectively.

Three years later, MUMA engaged in further negotiations through UGAASM and acquired One Square km under EL00059 at Kagaba Hill, Kamusenene, Bukuya T/C Kassanda, District on the 29<sup>th</sup> July 2020.

MUMA has created opportunities for over 3000 people at Kagaba Hill, mostly casual laborers, who currently operate 25 pits and 4 processing centers, with 12 of these producing 8000 tons of ore per month, with lab tests of 1.5g per ton, translating into 4Kgs per month.





Nuur Kalumba (2nd L) with Solidaridad staff at her mine processing site.

## The Small-scale Mining License

MUMA has grown from strength to another, now becoming the first indigenous artisanal miners to acquire a Small-scale Mining License (SML 00575) for 100.87 Hectares in Kassanda.

John Bosco Bukya, the national chairperson of UGAASM, testifies that the journey is one that reflects their will to survive, grow and tact to skillfully engage the government. The towering 60-year-old former civil servant has always advocated for negotiating with government following the evictions.

"We are grateful to government for having listened to us and our concerns and making Ugandans a priority to benefit from the ASM sector. Our children and great grandchildren will benefit from our struggles and we hope to push this sector to greater heights," he quipped.

Emmanuel Kibirige, the general

secretary MUMA, says under the SML, the old way of doing things is going to change. "We are required to pay URA up to UGX 14 million in taxes and VAT; we must have a payroll and this implies that we shall be remitting mandatory savings to NSSF. We can no longer operate as artisanal miners of 2012," he said.

## Future plans

MUMA is forward looking to ramping up production under the SML and attracting investments. Kibirige says that the strategy has been to always be investment-ready, and have already forged partnerships with a refinery operator and are courting other potential investors.

As testament to this, there is already a chain of custody system at the mine site where all the ore, that leaves their over 25 active mining pits, is tracked all the way to the processing facility.

MUMA also has an Exploration License EL00436 for 810.67

Hectares, with plans to scale up our production to five times or more, putting estimated production at 1000Kg or more per year.

Mr. Kibirige says feasibility studies are also underway ahead of align with MUMA plans to apply for a Medium Scale License in the next five years.

Hydroelectric power will be extended to the Hill such that mining pits access power for their mining operations. There are also plans to develop a two-Mega Watt renewable energy power plant (solar energy) at the Hill and another at Kafene Processing Centre to cut production costs by 50%.

The association is also looking to its market and supply chain, having partnered with Fargo Commodities Limited, and an MoU in place that promises opportunities for fair pricing of gold mined by MUMA, benchmarked against the international market.



MUMA PRO Kajoba Saad



Pits are well labelled at MUMA

## Community development

Mr. Kajoba Saad, the public relations officer MUMA, and also community liaison, says they have supported at least 60 pupils with educational needs at Kagaba Parents and Kabuyimba Muslims Primary Schools. They have also rehabilitated and opened up new roads where in some instances have had to compensate locals for land to construct access roads which are also used for transportation by the community.

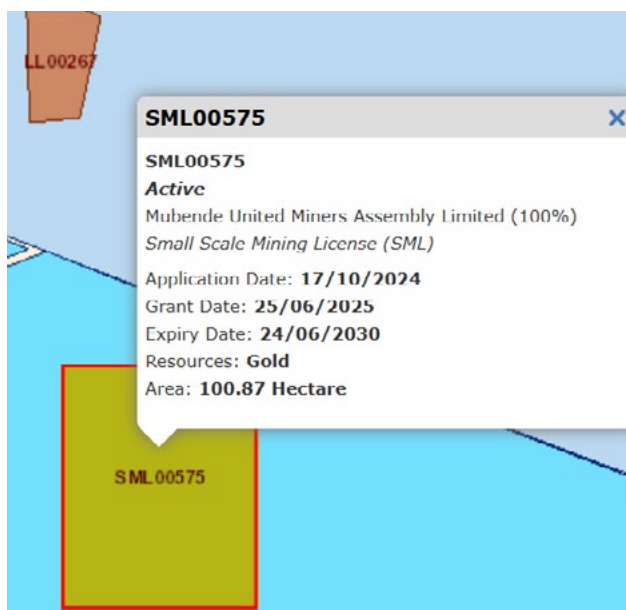
They supported Kagaba Parents Primary to construct teachers' quarters and also develop a football pitch.

They started a soccer academy for both boys and girls to promote talent in the mining communities, and a football club. Mr. Kajoba says some of the more talented students have gotten sports scholarships to other schools.

Interestingly, the team Happy Boys FC Kagaba, has at least two football exports to the Middle East in UAE and Qatar. The club has also been ably represented by 15 plays in the *Masaza Cup*, while MUMA has extended sponsorship for sports to Kassada District and Singo. A

women's football team is also in the offing to attract and develop talent girl children. All these social impact initiatives have been recognized by the District Local Government.

MUMA has also been able to take up some of the students interested in vocational work and allocated them to processing sites. MUMA has also incorporated a gender promotion strategy where they mentor young women in trading in ore to boost their incomes.



A snapshot of the mining cadaster showing the MUMA licensed area



# My journey in mining: The story of Chair Mark

**M**ark Asaph Jjombwe is fondly referred to as 'Chair Mark'. His journey to the mines was instigated by an unfortunate event after he was conned of all his money, and property in Kampala.

He had taken out a bank loan and invested in a bogus get-rich-quick scheme.

"They took all my stuff. I sold my house, my car and my plot. One Sunday I was home and overheard my wife and her sister talking about people working in the mines in Mubende," he narrates.

The year was 2010. He was intrigued by the story about gold mining. His sister-in-law had been sharing how her husband had been hospitalized after sustaining grievous injuries in the gold mines.

"I thought they were going to con

my wife just like I had fallen victim. I joined them in the sitting room and listened.

His sister-in-law's husband had been working in the mines in Lubaari when the pit collapsed. "I said, I'm not very good at visiting people. But I said I will visit him," Mark narrates.

At the hospital, he got the story of gold mining first hand and opted to give it a chance because 'I had no job at that time.'

Armed with just UGX 250,000, the last of his savings, he embarked on his journey into mining. While in Lubaari, he first observed, every step from extraction, processing and selling.

"Those days there weren't machines; crashing of ore was done using fabricated steel mortars and pestles!"



Chair Mark

Below: Women miners stockpile ore at a processing site.





The moment that stuck most was witnessing the selling and buyers paying out for the final product. "After weighing, they would give you money. I said, this is real!"

His first experience of selling was one gram to an Indian buyer in Kampala.

While organizing to return to the mines, he got wind of a gold rush at another site in Lujinji, later codenamed *Eky'e Kampala* because it was dominated by people from Kampala.

Armed with a small mattress, tarpaulin and work tools, including the mortar and pestle, Mark made his second landing.

"It was real hard work; crashing ore daily, determined lest I returned to the city, defeated. My lowest moment was when someone stole about 30 grammes from my stash!"

Unsurprisingly, the trade attracted many unscrupulous people. "Because we slept in tarpaulins, thieves would cut them open and steal valuables, including gold.

## Born a leader

At that site in Lujinji, he earned his moniker 'Chair'.

"I think I was born a leader, people started, you know, coming to me, reporting to me, this one has done this, and that. So, I would resolve their issues.

"One time, the community lynched a thief. When the police came, they said we had to appoint leaders.

*"One time, the community lynched a thief. When the police came, they said we had to appoint leaders. We went into campaigns where I mobilized the youth, they supported me, the villagers could not believe it. My line was very long. So, I became the chairman that time*



A miner displays gold pellets.

We went into campaigns where I mobilized the youth, they supported me, the villagers could not believe it. My line was very long. So, I became the chairman that time," Mark muses.

He shares that they also elected a committee, chaired by Emmanuel Kibirige, the MUMA secretary general, to oversee management

and order at the various pits.

As life improved, they set up comfortable living quarters furnished with home accessories.

"We had toilets, bathrooms, everything was there. Sofas, TVs, everything. So, when you entered my house, it was complete. With a fence."

Mark notes that it took him almost a year to strike substantial amount of gold. People got concerned that he never visited family back home and was stuck in the mines and in the process mobilized money for him to go home.

"It was about UGX 3 million which I invested in the business because I wanted to come to Kampala with a lot of money, but got only UGX 500,000 as returns. So, I went back to zero.

As fate would later dictate, he struck a good vein at one of his pits. Each sack of ore would produce 50 grams.

"I built my house and fully recovered. Mark was now back in the game!"

## The license woes

Lurking in shadows like a predator lying in wait, was the issue of illegality. The miners were in fact illegally encroaching on a licensed area. Mark testifies that for long, they had been engaging the license owner, AUC Mining, to allow them work, and even offered her a percentage of their proceeds, to no avail. This of course was on the heels of persistent threats of eviction.

"We thought, because we were many, government couldn't evict us! Every time there were attempts, the sheer number of people in the mines acted as a deterrent," Mark reflects.

What was to unfold in the coming few months however was nothing they would ever have imagined.

He notes that it was surreal that the mining community was comprised of nearly people from all corners of the country, including many from outside Uganda.

"People migrated to the mines with entire families; children, even grandmothers and fathers!"

Many had settled; bought land, built permanent houses, married and planned out their lives in the mines. All this dissipated on August 4, 2017. Mark estimates his losses at USD 100,000 including gold, cash, household valuables and land.

Several witness accounts allege after evictions many people, especially those from far, didn't return to their home districts, but got assimilated within the surrounding communities in Bukuya, Kassanda and others.

# Transformative Journey of Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining in Uganda

BY ALEX AMANYA, COUNTRY MANAGER,  
SOLIDARIDAD UGANDA

**A**rtisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) is a vital source of livelihood for thousands of Ugandans, contributing significantly to the country's economy. However, the sector remains largely informal and underserved. The story of Mubende United Miners Assembly (MUMA) showcases the power of collective action and partnerships in transforming the ASM sector.

## From Informality to Legitimacy

In 2017, MUMA members were forcefully evicted from their mining sites, but instead of giving up, they came together to advocate for their rights and secure access to mining areas. Through strategic partnerships and policy reforms, MUMA became the first ASM group in Uganda to secure a Small-Scale Mining License, marking a shift from informality to legitimacy - powerful testament to how organized community action can transform a crisis into an opportunity, paving the way for a more sustainable, inclusive, and responsible artisanal mining sector in Uganda.

At Solidaridad, we are proud to have walked alongside MUMA and UGAASM in this journey of transformation through the **RECLAIM Sustainability! Gold Project**, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands under the Power of Voices programme. Our contribution has been anchored in three critical areas:

**Advocacy and Civic Education:** We supported ASM groups to understand their rights and responsibilities, equipping them with the knowledge to engage meaningfully in policy processes.

**Policy Engagement:** Solidaridad worked with UGAASM to finalize and submit recommendations to the *Uganda Mining (Licensing) and Regulations and Uganda Mining (Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining) Regulations*, paving





the way for government approval and implementation.

**Capacity Building:** We invested in strengthening MUMA's organizational structures, leadership, and governance systems to meet the requirements for formal licensing.

This integrated approach not only positioned MUMA to secure a mining license but also laid the foundation for sustainable, responsible mining practices that prioritize safety, environmental protection, and inclusion of women and youth.

MUMA's achievement is more than a local victory; it is a blueprint for ASM transformation across Uganda. The lesson is clear: Legalisation is possible when miners are organized, empowered, and supported by progressive policies and strategic partnerships.

### Lessons learnt

Collective Action Works: MUMA's determination and collective action led to policy reforms and recognition of artisanal miners.

- **Partnerships are Crucial:** Strategic partnerships with civil society organizations and development partners supported MUMA's journey.
- **Capacity Building is Essential:** Strengthening organizational structures and leadership is vital for sustainable mining practices.
- **Replication and Scaling Up:** The success of MUMA can be replicated across Uganda, requiring continued investment in capacity building, financial literacy, and access to affordable capital.

The formalization of MUMA is a testament to the potential of ASM to contribute to Uganda's economy and uplift rural communities. With continued support and investment, the sector can become a driving force for sustainable development and inclusive growth.

## Breaking Women Mining in Uganda

## Barriers: Redefining

For decades, Uganda's gold sector was seen as a man's domain yet, millions of women, who happen to make up almost half the global ASM workforce – reaching up to even 70% in countries like Guinea and Uganda – still languish at the lower end of value chain, earning less than men, working less lucrative jobs, affected most by exposure to hazardous substances like mercury; susceptible to gender-based sexual violence, among many other challenges.

However, many have also stood toe-to-toe with their male counterparts and broken these barriers, rewriting this narrative, turning challenges into opportunities, and inspiring their communities through courage, leadership, and resilience. UGAASM profiles some of the women leaders in mining who continue to breach these barriers and inspire others.



### Josephine Agutu

The 47-year old teacher from Busia is the UGAASM coordinator eastern region, and the secretary of Tiira Small-scale Miners Association. who has carried her advocacy from villages in Tiira, Busia, and national conferences to global stages, advocating for gender inclusion in mining and challenging deep-rooted cultural barriers. She remains a ferocious girl child activist, mentoring young women and counseling them on pursuing education opportunities and fighting stereotyping.



### Jalia Namatovu

Fondly referred to as 'Kassanda' by her colleagues, the chairperson of the women-only Mubende Women Gold Miners Association has been in the mines since 2015. Following the evictions, she was encouraged by the current MUMA director, Hajji Kato, to mobilise women miners and form an association. She is profoundly remembered for crying out to government to listen to the plight of evicted miners and license them during the artisanal and small-scale mining and quarrying conferences by Africa Center for Energy and Mineral Policy.



### **Phyllis Nankoma**

The 59-year old miner has been in the trade since 2017 before the Mubende evictions. She owns and manages a pit – called Eagle Eye – at Kagaba Hill, and a processing, employing more than 50 people, mostly casual workers. A very vocal women representative of UGAASM and one of two women directors with MUMA, the gender champion mentors young people on gender-related issues. She is also the secretary of Mubende Women Gold Miners, Processors and Traders' Cooperative Society under MUMA.



### **Joweria Nafunka**

A prominent mobiliser for western Uganda under UGAASM, she has been a miner for 12 years. She championed women miners to advocate for their rights in the mining operations and fostered the formation Buhweju Women Miners' Association. To address their challenges, she started a VSLA to save money and support their families through creating their own income streams. She is an advocate for financial literacy among women, promoting equity among miners, occupational health and safety and against domestic violence.



### **Nuur Kalumba**

The 53-year-old businesswoman owns a pit and processing center employing up to 70 people. She is the treasurer of Mubende Women Gold Miners, Processors and Traders' Cooperative Society. Also a Gender Champion trained under the Solidaridad East and Central Africa Reclaim Sustainability Project, she pursued her dream of working in mining while shouldering household responsibilities, including paying school fees for their children.



### **Rose Kyakuhaire**

The chairperson of Mubende Women Gold Miners, Processors and Traders' Cooperative Society is a nurse by profession, having worked in the mines for over 8 years, offering much needed healthcare services to miners and locals in the surrounding communities. Though she is not a miner, her prominence in the community has earned her a leadership role with the miners' cooperative. She is also gender champion.



### **Mutesi Afua**

The UGAASM mobiliser and businesswoman is the founder and chairperson of Kyoyima Omuto Women Gold Miners' Association in Namayingo District; and chairperson Kyoyima Omuto Namayingo Gold Miners Cooperative Society. She has been in trade for 12 years, supporting different civil society organisations make entry into the communities.



### **Esther Nabwire**

The Buduma Parish women councilor in Namayingo District is the treasurer and co-founder Kyoyima Omuto Women Gold Miners' Association in Namayingo District; and treasurer Kyoyima Omuto Namayingo Gold Miners Cooperative Society. She has been in the trade for 12 years, mentoring and supporting young women miners.





### Comfort Akello

With an academic and work background in social work, she ventured into the quarrying business in 2014 where she quickly learnt women were being exploited by middlemen, and exploitative loans. She embarked on a mission to champion the formation of 3 well established VSLA groups where women can save and borrow from at minimal interest rates. She had also been pivotal in formalizing at least 20 quarry associations under UGAASM and worked with partners to successfully lobby for grants under the UNDP ACP-EU development minerals project.



### Kampaire Moirrah

The businesswoman and public servant deals in black sand in Kisoro. A UGAASM mobiliser, she has been in the mining sector over 10 years.



Resilience Fund Africa Liaison, Jacques Muhindo, interacts with school goers who have to fend for their own school fees in the gold mines in Amonikakine, Busia.

## Artisanal Mining and Community Resilience

BY JACQUES MUHINDO

**A**cross Africa, mineral resources remain a vital source of income and livelihoods for countless communities. Artisanal and Small-scale Miners (ASMs) play a critical role in ensuring that these resources benefit local populations in areas of exploitation. Often, ASMs are not outsiders—they are members of the community, active participants in local development, and contributors to resilience-building efforts.

However, in many contexts, ASM activities do not always translate into community development. In fragile environments, mining can become an added vulnerability when it is not formalized or integrated into broader development strategies. Without formalization, ASMs risk falling into illegal mining networks, which can have harmful consequences for local communities.

The cost of informal and illegal mining varies across regions, but three major trends are consistently observed in African contexts: environmental degradation due to unregulated practices, the proliferation of illicit markets, including child exploitation and a disconnect between mining income and improved socioeconomic welfare for communities.

To reverse these trends, building community resilience must begin with the formalization and legalization of ASM activities. Ensuring that miners operate with proper licenses is not just a regulatory issue—it is a development imperative. Legal recognition helps align mining practices with national laws and ensures that the benefits of mineral exploitation contribute meaningfully to local development.

Formalizing ASM is a pathway to safer, more inclusive, and sustainable mining—one that protects communities and unlocks the full potential of Africa's mineral wealth.

During the Resilience Dialogue held in Busia on May 7<sup>th</sup> 2025, under

the leadership of UGAASM, two major priorities were identified as central to current and future interventions by ASM associations and mining stakeholders: building community resilience to illegal mining and ensuring that ASM contributes meaningfully to local development. These pillars reflect a growing consensus that ASM must be integrated into broader development frameworks and that communities should be at the heart of efforts to address mining-related vulnerabilities.

Building resilience to illegal mining requires a shift in perspective—one that goes beyond legal enforcement. Illicit mining must be understood as a community issue, not just a regulatory challenge. Local communities affected by illegal mining must be actively involved in designing solutions that respond to their realities. This includes addressing not only the mining itself but also the broader illicit markets and social risks that often emerge in areas where unregulated mining activities take place.

In many contexts, illegal mining fuels environmental degradation, child exploitation, and economic instability. These impacts are rarely isolated—they compound existing vulnerabilities and undermine local development. The Busia Dialogue emphasized that formalizing ASM is not just about compliance; it is a resilience strategy. Legal recognition helps align mining practices with national laws and ensures that the benefits of mineral exploitation contribute to inclusive growth, stability, and long-term community well-being.

Community development in mining areas requires a broader lens—one that views mining not only as a source of income for miners but as a lever for local transformation. Whether modern or artisanal, mining activities shape the socioeconomic landscape of surrounding communities. They generate new opportunities and risks, including alternative income streams for youth. Yet, these opportunities can pose serious threats to education, as seen during the Resilience Dialogue in Busia, where it was noted that many



Jacques Muhindo

*Mining brings diversity to communities by attracting people from outside the area—individuals who introduce new knowledge, enrich local cultures, and contribute to the economy.*

children are dropping out of school to join mining activities.

Should mining be blamed for high dropout rates in these communities? The answer demands nuance. On one hand, many children who leave school come from deeply vulnerable backgrounds. Mining offers them immediate relief—a chance to earn, support their families, and envision a future beyond formal education. In such contexts, mining becomes a survival strategy, not a rebellion against learning. It reflects the urgent needs of households grappling with poverty and limited alternatives.

On the other hand, this immediate response to hardship creates long-term vulnerability. Dropping out deprives children of the opportunity to complete basic education and access the empowerment it brings. The short-term relief of mining work often exposes them to exploitation—physical, economic, and psychological—that can haunt them for years. Without safeguards, these children risk losing not only

their education but also their health, safety, and future potential.

Mining brings diversity to communities by attracting people from outside the area—individuals who introduce new knowledge, enrich local cultures, and contribute to the economy. While this influx may appear beneficial, it can also disrupt the social fabric and erode local values. Insights from the Busia dialogue and experiences across Africa reveal how mining communities affect family structures. Temporary relationships between visiting miners and local residents often result in unattended children and fractured households, leaving lasting social consequences.

Building resilience in mining communities requires forward-thinking—connecting mining activities to the long-term development these communities deserve. This means looking beyond immediate economic gains and ensuring that mining aligns with the future aspirations of local populations. Responsible mining must respect the laws that protect both nature and people, safeguard children's education, and avoid contributing to public health challenges. These include the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, which remain difficult to address in many African contexts where open dialogue on sexual health is still taboo.

Mining should not be a source of vulnerability—it should be a catalyst for inclusive, sustainable development. That begins with recognizing its complex social impacts and committing to practices that protect the dignity, health, and future of the communities it touches. At the end of the day, mining activities must be assessed through the lens of local development. Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM) is expected to serve as a catalyst for socioeconomic progress and environmental stewardship in the communities where it operates. When this potential is not realized, stakeholders—including government actors—must consider appropriate responses to ensure that local populations benefit more fully and equitably from the mineral resources in their regions.





Project Manager Ismael Ocen talks to a miners in Nabilatuk district, Natirea sub county.

## How government can tackle environmental crime in Karamoja

BY ISMAEL OCEN

**T**he Ocean One Social Research Centre, through its efforts in the Karamoja sub-region, has identified the difficulties in holding individuals accountable for environmental offenses.

Pastoralists have lost access to grazing areas due to illegal gold mining activities and land conversion, threatening their livelihoods and worsening poverty in a region vital to the nation.

The implementation of AI drone technology for data collection aims to enhance police responses to environmental crimes, with a

particular focus on improving the pace and scale of law enforcement's reaction to incidents as they occur. It is alarming that law enforcement in these remote areas inhabited by nomadic pastoralists, where unlawful gold mining occurs, often lacks the necessary data to prosecute offenders.

Furthermore, even stakeholders like lawyers and prosecutors receive incomplete information, hindering their ability to effectively hold wrongdoers accountable. Consequently, organized crime groups are increasingly exploiting this information gap to amass wealth, support their operations, and fund nomadic combatants to protect their interests.

Additionally, illegal gold mining in pastoralist regions, which receives minimal government oversight, is highly profitable and often attracts less law enforcement scrutiny compared to other serious and violent crimes. Thus, there is a pressing need for enhanced AI-driven data collection technologies.

The Ocean One Social Research Centre advocates for the utilization of Artificial Intelligence (AI) with drone technology to gather information that will improve law enforcement's response to illegal gold mining and other organized environmental crimes in the Karamoja region. This technology facilitates the use and availability of quality data, video footage, and





Miners in Moruangibu Parish, Lorengedwat Sub county.

*Embracing AI drone technology to gather data for law enforcement's efforts against illegal gold mining and environmental crime in Karamoja will aid in tracking the movements of criminals and illicit gold trafficking routes, recognizing behavioral patterns, and establishing targeted connections, thereby significantly enhancing the effectiveness of investigations.*

photos as essential resources in policing environmental offenses.

Embracing AI drone technology to gather data for law enforcement's efforts against illegal gold mining and environmental crime in Karamoja will aid in tracking the movements of criminals and illicit gold trafficking routes, recognizing behavioral patterns, and establishing targeted connections, thereby significantly enhancing the effectiveness of investigations.

To curtail illegal gold mining and land conversion in Karamoja, it is crucial to adopt a strategy that strengthens law enforcement, encourages community involvement, and

employs AI drone technology for data collection, monitoring, and regulation enforcement, thus promoting respect for socially marginalized indigenous peoples, fortifying institutions, and mechanisms to combat illicit mining and land conversion while ensuring transparency.

Furthermore, using AI drone technology to collect data for use by law enforcement to fight organized crime complements and reinforces the Mining and Minerals Act, 2022, which is the primary legal framework for preventing illegal mining, and it mandates that all individuals involved in mineral exploitation,

including beneficiation, to obtain a license. It will also complement the National Environment Act of 2019 that outlines severe penalties for those who violate regulations on natural resource extraction, including illegal sand mining, which can lead to fines and imprisonment.

The data generated will work along with closing the gap between development and law enforcement adoption, making the investigation and prevention of environmental crime and preventing the negative effects on the environment, which include soil erosion, the formation of sinkholes, loss of biodiversity, and contamination.



# Over 6,800 artisanal gold miners registered under BRASM project



Above: Biometric registration of artisanal gold miners in Kassanda in 2023.

The Government of Uganda, through its Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development has registered a total of 6,884 gold miners in Kassanda, Buhweju, Busia and Namayingo districts under the Biometric Registration of Artisanal Miners' Project (BRASM).

Of these, 4877 are male while 2007 are female. The project is part of the multifaceted strategy within the first phase of the formalization of artisanal miners under the Mining and Minerals Act 2022.

The Government of Uganda contracted the Africa Center for Energy and Mineral Policy (ACEMP) to implement this initial phase, which conducted registration

activities up to June 2023.

Since July 2023, the Government of Uganda, through the Mines Department, has continued the registration on a quarterly basis ensuring the sustained formalization of artisanal miners.

According to the Commissioner of Mines and Head of the Mineral Development Programme, Ms. Agnes Alaba, the registration will continue on a quarterly basis so as to scale up the numbers.

The biometric registration is supposed to take stock of how many people are directly operating in the ASM sub sector for integration into national development plans, as enshrined in the National

Development Plan 3.

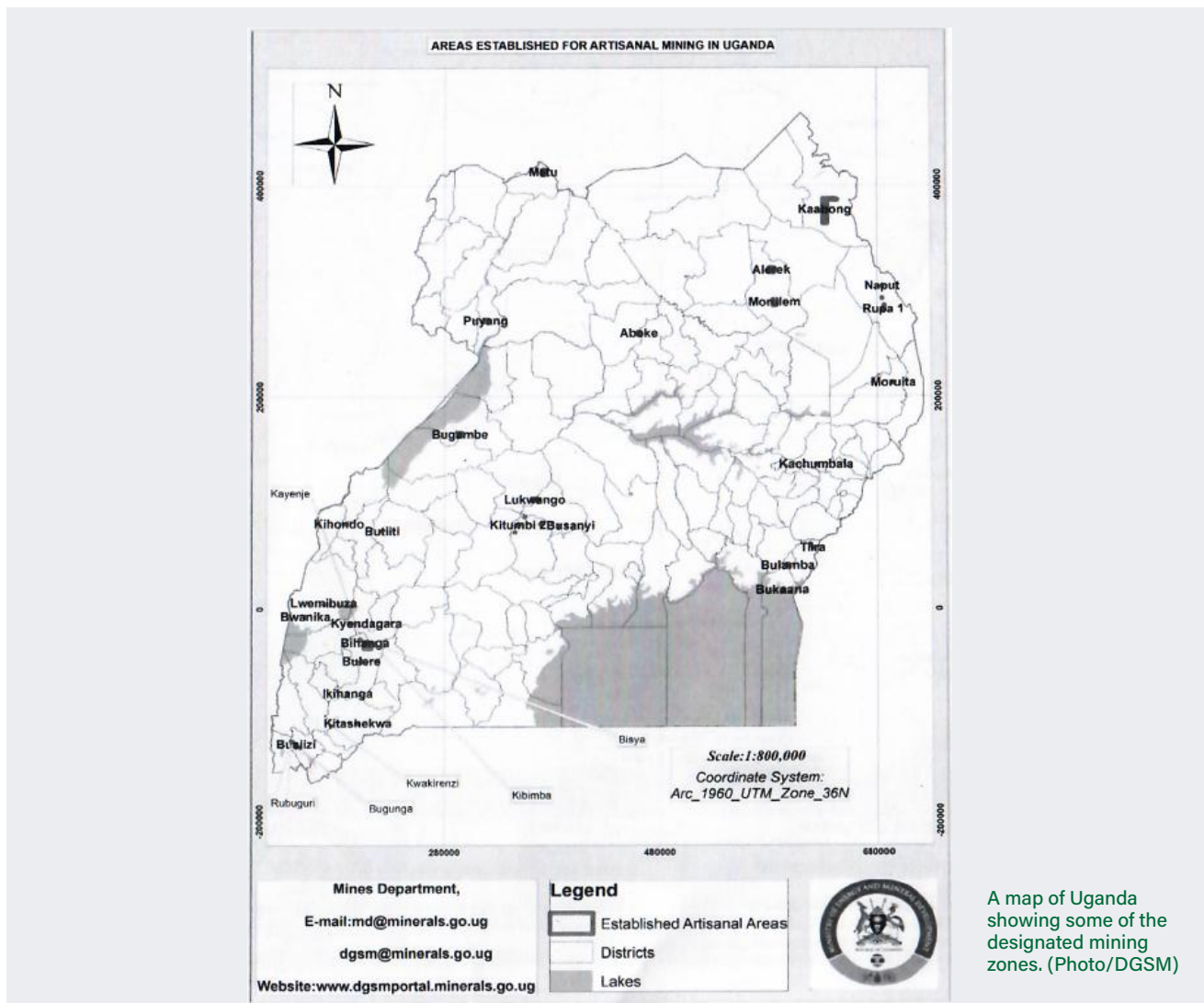
The miners are supposed to acquire identity cards which are expected to be issued next year, according to officials at the directorate.

The registration of miners was made possible with mobilization efforts through the UGAASM regional structures.

According to the data available, majority of the miners registered were under 22 associations while others registered as individuals.

For those with national IDs the registration is seamless as the platform is linked to the national database where individual bio is easily retrievable.

# Government designates artisanal mining zones countrywide



**M**inistry of Energy and Minerals Development has designated Artisanal and Mining Zones countrywide.

The ASM zones are designated under the Mining and Minerals (Artisanal Mining) Regulations 2025 which operationalize the laws pertaining to artisanal mining operations in the country as defined in the Mining and Minerals Act 2022.

The Mining and Minerals Act 2022 differentiate artisanal from small-scale mining. Artisanal mining,

*Under the regulations, artisanal areas may be de-gazetted if they meet the criteria for small, medium or large scale operations*

according to Ugandan laws, is a preserve for indigenous Ugandans.

Under the regulations, artisanal areas may be de-gazetted if they meet the criteria for small, medium or large scale operations; when the

mining license holder applies for an upgrade, a strategic, hazardous or radioactive mineral has been discovered or the area has become unsafe as a result of a natural hazard.

Relatedly, Uganda Association of Artisanal and Small-scale Miners, with support of the Directorate of Geological Survey and Mines, is sensitizing its miners about the regulations.

Sensitization workshops have so far been done in Busia, Namayingo and Kassanda districts.



# ASMs frustrated by Licensing delays

Artisanal and Small-scale operators still face challenges with licensing, amidst efforts to play catch up with the new mining legislation, the Mining and Minerals Act of 2022, and encouraging illegal mining in the process.

Currently, there are only two artisanal mining associations with Small-scale Licenses, while there is not a single Artisanal Mining License under the new licensing regime.

During a community dialogue organized by Uganda Association of Artisanal and Small-scale Miners in Busia in May this year, participants raised a number of challenges around licensing, berating the costly delays at the directorate of geological survey and mines, coupled with the stringent requirements that accompany the applications.

Padde Engidho, the eastern region chairperson of UGAASM, noted that while many of the miners are still grappling to understand the law governing the sector, the directorate is only complicating things with further stringent terms such as integrating environmental social governance principles in their operations.

A major area of concern for the miners is the Environmental and Social Impact Assessment report required as a condition for granting licenses.

"Consultants are charging as much as USD 25,000 to do a comprehensive ESIA which is astronomically high," argued Kibirige Emmanuel, the UGAASM national coordinator. Additionally, even the grating of the ESIA certificate by the National Environmental Authority is a cumbersome process.

During the dialogue, participants put the eastern region inspector of mines, Morris Tabaaro, to the sword, tasking him to explain the cause of delays, and agitating for some of the requirements to be relaxed as the ASM sector struggles to grow.



Inspector of Mines Morris Tabaaro explaining to miners at a dialogue in Busia on May 8, 2025.

"In Tanzania, they have the Environmental Management Plans instead of the ESIA as a one of the requirements for licensing. Why can we not replicate that here? Wondered Kibirige.

This publication can confirm that following Mr. Tabaaro's patient engagement with the miners, and making a number of clarifications on several key issues, UGAASM has had a number of community dialogues with miners, with officials from the directorate of geological survey and mines at hand to respond to issues.

Speaking to these concerns, Geoffrey Odur Ojok, a lawyer and mineral and energy economist, says he takes issue with the requirement of having a bank account statement to process a mining right.

"When you're going to open up an account, they'll ask you for a mining license or a prospecting or something. Now those two, whether one or the other, stifle down the process of getting a license. Artisanal miners who are still in the formalization process, have to start afresh, meaning that they cannot operate a mining license.

"The ministry also wants a bank

account to show that you have money and capacity to operate. So now you can never start up a new mining company or you can never operate. Because you cannot open a bank account of a new company or a new artisanal mining company or an organization that formed because of those two requirements," he submits," Mr. Ojok says.

Mr. John Bosco Bukya, the chairperson of the national association of artisanal and small-scale miners, says while there are positive developments in the sector such as Bank of Uganda's gold domestic purchase project and the establishment of mineral markets, only a few mining licenses have been issued to ASMs.

Ms. Grace Nassuna, assistant commissioner geoscience, while responding to this issue at the mineral markets sensitization workshop in Kampala, argued that the onus is on the miners to start applying online as everything is submitted via the cadaster.

All said and done, there is need for continuous sensitization of miners regarding the process, and also continuous engagement with stakeholders to find common ground on the sticking points.

# Mineral markets to benefit ASMs – Commissioner of mines

Plans by Government to establish mineral markets to regulate mineral trade, increase transparency and accountability, and boost investor confidence are in high gear.

These were the remarks of Ms. Agnes Alaba, the commissioner of mines, directorate of geological survey and mines at a stakeholder sensitisation workshop on mineral markets, which also doubled as a consultative forum among an array of key stakeholders and policy influencers

The markets will create a secure and structured environment for mineral trading, where buyers and sellers can meet and transact.

The establishment of mineral markets is expected to increase revenue for government through taxes and royalties; improve livelihoods for miners through better prices and access to markets; enhance transparency and accountability through tracking and monitoring of mineral transactions and boost investor confidence through a structured and regulated market.

At a press briefing, Uganda police reported a mindboggling 48 cases of gold-related fraud in just a space of four months, something that is soiling the country's reputation and bogging down investor confidence. Establishing a structured and regulated market, according to Ms. Alaba, will curb this vice.

The Commissioner said the markets will mainly be targeting artisanal and small-scale miners because a company like Wagagai Mining in Busia has a fully integrated value chain with refining capabilities and would probably be exporting their gold.

While stakeholders hailed the



Ms. Alaba responds to the press on the sidelines of the sensitization workshop.

*Ms. Alaba said there is already criteria for the market locations, which includes proximity to busy mine sites and business centers... gold rush areas famous with artisanal miners would be designated ASM zones, in addition to the 39 unveiled during the mineral wealth conference on November 23, 2025*

development, there remain challenges, especially that at least 90% of gold mined in Uganda is by artisanal and small-scale miners.

The chairperson of Uganda Association of Artisanal and Small-scale Miners, John Bosco Bukya, while giving his two cents about

## What to know:

- The Pilot project is to be established in selected locations, including Karamoja Sub-region, Kampala, Entebbe and Kassanda, and will be increased in number
- The target minerals are Gold, Tin and Gemstones
- Regulations are to be drafted to govern the operation of mineral markets and mine centers.
- There is ongoing consultation with stakeholders, including miners, dealers, buyers, and government agencies.



the development, expressed disappointment that majority of the miners who are being touted to benefit from the establishment of the mineral markets are not licensed.

"Since the Minerals and Mining Act of 2022 was enacted, Uganda has not more than eight small-scale mining places issued, and has zero artisanal mining licenses issued, because the regulation is late. And we're now talking about the markets. And these are the people who should be doing the work.

"The idea is so good, so wonderful, but there is something that we must do. How easy would it be for government to assess and regulate these artisanal and small-scale miners?" He wondered.

Ms. Alaba said there is already criteria for the market locations, which includes proximity to busy mine sites and business centers. She mentioned Kassanda, Karamoja sub region (in Moroto, Kaabong, Karita) which already has an active beneficiation center; Kampala and Entebbe, which has proximity to Entebbe Airport, which is an export route.

Ms. Alaba also revealed that gold rush areas famous with artisanal miners would be designated ASM zones, in addition to the 39 unveiled during the mineral wealth conference on November 23, 2025 at Serena Hotel in Kampala.

The mineral markets were benchmarked in Tanzania which the Commissioner revealed has established a formalized mineral trade status, with over 44 markets in the country.

## Uganda's ASM Sector: A story of Resilience and Hope



*Mr. Kenneth Asiimwe, formerly head of projects and research at the Uganda Chamber of Mines and Energy, has a new mandate as CEO at UGAASM. Below are excerpts of an interview where he shares his thoughts on the sector, and vision for the national miners' body.*

### Assessment of the ASM Sector's Current State

"I think, apart from gold miners, artisanal and small-scale mining has always been a source of livelihood for very many Ugandans. Although everyone fronts their figures government, associations they lack a comprehensive census or legitimate data. Minerals like sand, clay, gold are all part of a vibrant sector. For example, artisanal miners supply the construction

industry with granite, dimension stones, and sand, supporting around 2 million dependents. Based on member associations and their sites, there's a significant number of workers roughly a thousand per association indicating the sector's substantial contribution to livelihoods and the economy."

## Focusing on Demography and Mineral Types

"Everyone's eyes are on gold, but the sector is much more diverse. Minerals like sand, granite, iron ore, and clay are just as crucial for livelihoods. The focus on gold seems disproportionate, even though non-gold minerals sustain many households. Policymakers have not fully harnessed the potential of these other minerals because they usually concentrate on the so-called '3TGs' Tin, Tantalum, Tungsten and Gold mainly driven by international grants and traceability requirements. We need to set our own national agenda to develop this sector holistically."

## Environmental and Sector Challenges

"The biggest challenge in mining is environmental degradation yet, ironically, agriculture impacts much larger areas and also degrades the environment. The contradiction is that everyone targets mining for environmental harm when farming also uses harmful fertilizers that pollute lakes, and miners use mercury, which affects water bodies. As CEO of UGAASM, I've realized the main gap is the lack of extension services coaching, training, and sustainable mining practices. Enforcement alone won't help; we need to demonstrate how miners can adopt environmentally sustainable methods through extension work involving engineers, social workers, legal advisors."

## Progress and Policy Inclusion of ASM

"Large-scale mining is becoming less viable; investing heavily in big mines is increasingly difficult. African countries are recognizing that small-scale miners are vital. For instance, in Ghana, artisanal miners are now replacing large miners in gold provision, and laws are favoring small-scale empowerment in Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Uganda too is waking up to the fact that small-scale miners can be more valuable than foreign companies seeking tax holidays. We now have more forums where artisanal mining is represented, coinciding with a shift in perceptions."

## Operational Environment and Policy Realities

"The environment is improving, but demands from policymakers are still unrealistic. Requiring environmental impact assessments (EIAs) from small miners akin to those for large projects is impractical. Small-scale miners operate in shallow pits, often farm-sized, and don't need lengthy EIAs what they need is a simple environmental management plan. Regulations should be flexible, especially for licenses that are typically valid for one or two years. We advocate for a phased approach begin with management plans, and only request detailed EIAs once miners achieve greater financial capacity."

## Future Vision and UGAASM's Goals

"In the next five years, I want as many small-scale miners licensed as possible. Currently, our target of 50 licenses annually is slow; we've barely achieved three in six months. We aim to promote other minerals like granite, bentonite, and tin, besides gold. Critical to this is ensuring all miners have access to energy electricity either from the national grid or off-grid solutions and finance. We're engaging banks and insurance companies to offer health insurance and credit facilities. We want to facilitate formal finance arrangements where banks buy pre-qualified gold from small miners at fair prices and advance payments, rather than traditional loans with high-interest rates."

## Advocacy and Policy Engagement

"We will continue advocating for laws that are fair, practical, and tailored to Uganda's realities. We recognize that policies formulated abroad like in Germany or Australia don't always fit here. Our goal is to ensure miners are licensed, compliant, and supported with sustainable infrastructure, environmental guidelines, and financial access. We aim for continuous engagement, negotiations, and adaptation, emphasizing that mining is part of our heritage. Mining originated in Africa; we had the Bakiga in Uganda, who mined copper and iron long ago."



# Development minerals ASMs in northern Uganda take on value addition

Tiles are some of the products being produced by the development minerals miners at Kidere mining site in Gulu City.

**A**rtisanal and Small-scale Miners of development minerals in northern Uganda have scaled their operations embracing value addition.

The miners have walked the journey since 2019, transforming from only extraction as artisanal miners to value addition, with support from UNDP under the ACP-EU Development Minerals Project.

Dan Kidega, the northern Uganda regional chairperson of UGAASM, says: "We have moved from the days of working as artisanal miners and are now making finished products. We trained some members to use the machines with support from UNDP."

He says they have trained a group of their miners at Kidere quarry in Gulu City to make products like slate stones, concrete poles, marks tones.

The northern Uganda ASMs association based in Gulu City, which forms the northern Uganda regional arm of the Uganda



Miners at the construction yard Kidere mining site in Gulu City.

Association of Artisanal and Small-scale Miners, comprises 27 active associations from the districts of Alebtong, Amuru, Gulu, Lira, Omoro, Nwoya and Pader.

Its leadership has also been instrumental in sensitisation of miners on formalisation and capacity building in areas of occupational health and safety at the mine sites beyond Gulu City, business skills training, among others.

During the review of the Mining and Minerals Act of 2022, members of parliament differed the section to regulate commercial extraction of development minerals like sand, clay, marble, and aggregate stone, arguing that the sub sector was a mass employer and source of livelihoods for millions of Ugandans and could therefore not be treated under the same mining law. They tasked the ministry to come up with a standalone law for development minerals.



A woman pans for gold at Rutondo mine in Rwanda. Photo/GIZ

## Sustainable Development of the Mining Sector in Uganda (SDMU) Project to unlock mineral potential

The Sustainable Development of the Mining Sector in Uganda (SDMU) project, co-financed by the German Government and the European Union, is implemented by GIZ in partnership with the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development. Scheduled to run from 2025 to 2027, the project seeks to transform Uganda's mineral sector to contribute to socio-economic development while promoting regional cooperation on peace, security, and responsible resource governance in the Great Lakes Region.

Uganda is endowed with significant mineral deposits including graphite, nickel, copper, and cobalt that

are vital for renewable energy technologies and the global shift to a low-carbon economy. However, this potential has yet to translate into broad-based growth. Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sustains thousands of livelihoods, but informality, unsafe practices, environmental degradation, limited finance, incomplete geological data, and weak oversight continue to hold back progress.

The Government of Uganda has taken steps to address these challenges, most notably through the Mining and Minerals Act, 2022. The Act seeks to formalise artisanal mining, promote responsible practices, and increase the sector's contribution to national

development. Yet legislation alone is insufficient; real transformation requires professionalisation of operations, stronger governance, and investment across the mineral value chain.

The SDMU project responds by promoting responsible and sustainable mining practices aligned with international standards such as those of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Union, and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). Its approach focuses on improving digitalisation in mineral governance in Uganda, improving the investment climate, strengthening regulatory frameworks, formalisation of the ASM sector, building capacity for both public and private actors, and supporting value addition through mineral processing. These measures aim to foster a professional, transparent, and globally competitive industry that benefits local communities while safeguarding the environment.

Collaboration with national institutions including the Departments of Geological Survey and Mines, the Uganda Association of Artisanal and Small-Scale Miners (UGAASM, the Uganda Investment Authority, the Uganda Chamber of Energy and Minerals, and) ensures strong local ownership.

Through this combination of legal reforms, institutional capacity development, and technological innovation, the SDMU project seeks to unlock Uganda's mineral potential in ways that promote environmental stewardship, social inclusion, and equitable economic growth. Although the project concludes in 2027, its impact is intended to endure well beyond its lifespan, contributing to a mining sector that is both sustainable and globally competitive.





In the past women miners were restricted to selected work at the mine site which also affected their way of earning. With awareness on gender inclusion, planetGOLD is working to change this mindset. Courtesy photo

## PlanetGOLD Uganda empowering artisanal & small-scale gold miners toward a mercury-free future

*Through partnerships, and awareness, the project is not just reducing mercury use, it is empowering miners, protecting the ecosystem, and paving the way for a more responsible gold mining industry.*

Since 2022, the planetGOLD Uganda project has been working towards safer mining, mercury-free gold processing technologies. Supported by the Global Environment Facility and led by the UN Environment Programme, executed by IMPACT

in partnership with Uganda's National Environment Management Authority and the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development under the Department of Mines, the project is driving a nationwide movement toward responsible and mercury-free gold mining.

### Empowering Miners through Cooperatives

The project has helped establish nine miners' cooperatives in Kassanda, Moroto, and Amudat, and one in Namayingo, Kisoro, and Buhweju districts over the last one year alone, enabling miners to access financing, invest in safer equipment, and participate in responsible gold supply chains.

The project is drawing from Uganda's experience of the cooperative model already well



known among farmers as a reliable way to boost productivity, access credit, have a big voice and benefit from government programmes.

Formalization through cooperatives is key to unlocking miners' full potential, according to Lynn Gitu, the project manager.

"Our interest in working with the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives began when we realized that formalization must go beyond simply encouraging miners to form groups," she explains. "Establishing registered cooperatives is the only way miners can fully integrate into the formal legal system and benefit from national programmes."

Beyond paperwork, formalization is rather a critical step toward empowerment; organising miners into cooperatives to enable them access financing, invest in safer mining equipment, and participate in responsible gold supply chains.

### Supporting Policy and Legal Awareness

The project partnered with the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development to organize nationwide consultations on proposed artisanal mining regulations, ensuring miners understand the implications of the new Mining and Minerals Law.

These workshops bridged the gap between policy and practice, enabling miners to shape regulations governing their work.

*"Our interest in working with the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives began when we realized that formalization must go beyond simply encouraging miners to form groups... Establishing registered cooperatives is the only way miners can fully integrate into the formal legal system and benefit from national programmes"*

### Building Capacity for Enforcement and Safety

The project trained 22 officers from the Uganda Police Force's Minerals Protection Unit on enforcing mining regulations, health and environmental dangers of mercury, and effective community engagement.

This training fosters a more informed and collaborative approach to regulation, prioritizing safety, fairness, and sustainability.

### Championing Gender Inclusion and Mercury-Free Gold Recovery

The project promotes gender inclusion through training and awareness meetings, enabling women to take on more significant roles in mining.

Monica, a miner from Tiira Mine Site, exemplifies this transformation, adopting safer gold recovery methods and advocating for mercury-free mining.

"Before the trainings, we didn't understand how dangerous

mercury was," she recalls. "We started noticing that some of our colleagues were very forgetful and experienced tremors in their extremities. Later, we learned it could be due to mercury exposure."

### Health and Environment

The project promotes mercury-free technologies and raises awareness about the environmental effects of mercury use, protecting community well-being and biodiversity.

This aligns with Uganda's commitments under the Minamata Convention on Mercury, protecting human health and the environment from mercury's dangers.

As planetGOLD Uganda continues to make progress towards a mercury-free artisanal and small-scale mining sector, it goes to demonstrate that responsible mining is achievable when miners, government, and communities work together. Through partnerships, and awareness, the project is not just reducing mercury use, it is empowering miners, protecting the ecosystem, and paving the way for a more responsible gold mining industry.





# Building the Future of Uganda's Gold Industry



**Fargo Commodities Trading (U) Ltd.** is proud to stand at the forefront of Uganda's growing gold sector. Based in Entebbe, our company plays a key role in refining, trading, and developing responsible gold supply chains that contribute directly to Uganda's economic progress. We are proud to be one of only a few government registered refineries in Uganda.

Through our partnership with UGAASM, we have access to a wide network of artisanal and small-scale miners across the country, ensuring that local producers are integrated into a transparent, sustainable, and profitable gold ecosystem.

Fargo Uganda operates as part of the international Fargo Group, headquartered in Bergamo, Italy. This strong connection with Fargo S.p.A. brings European expertise, advanced technology, and strict compliance standards to Uganda. Together, we are bridging the gap between African production and European refining excellence, ensuring every gram of gold is processed responsibly and efficiently.

Our vision is to transform Uganda into a leading regional hub for ethical gold refining and trade. We believe that Uganda's natural wealth should directly benefit its people, creating jobs, supporting local mining communities, and strengthening the national economy.

At Fargo Uganda, we are committed to innovation, training, and sustainable growth. We work hand in hand with local authorities and international partners to ensure that Ugandan gold meets the highest global standards.

## Looking Ahead

The future of the gold industry in Uganda is bright. As global demand for responsibly sourced gold continues to grow, Uganda stands ready to take its place on the world stage. Fargo Commodities Trading (U) Ltd. will continue to lead this journey, promoting transparency, empowering miners, and ensuring that Uganda's gold industry shines with integrity, opportunity, and pride.

[www.fargocommodities.africa](http://www.fargocommodities.africa)



## **Transforming Artisanal Gold Production in Uganda**

**aCuratio Gold Uganda Limited** is partnering with local Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Miners (ASGMs) to transform gold production in Uganda.

The framework of the partnerships will see licensed ASGMs hold the mineral tenure and mine the ore, and aCuratio processing the ore in a central mechanised processing plant. The process will be mercury-free.

By using a modern mechanical processing plant, we shall substantially increase gold recovery from the ore, by as much as 2 to 3 times the recoveries the ASGMs can achieve.

The gold will be jointly sold in the market, with each partner recovering their costs, and then splitting the remaining revenue.

The overall value of the mined ore will substantially increase compared to current practices, boosting miners' incomes.

aCuratio also is collaborating with the School of Mines at Busitema University to offer work-study positions for students to get hands-on experience working in a modern gold- processing plant.

Training and this transfer of technology are important to us, to the miners, and for Uganda, professionalising and transforming the ASGM sector.

The pilot project will be with Mubende United Miners Assembly in the Kassanda district, and Tiira Landlords Artisanal Miners Association/Busia United Small-Scale Mining in the Busia district.

We are working to start production at both projects in the first half of 2026.

Once production begins, we will be looking to increase production at both locations over time, to establish facilities in other parts of Uganda and then step out to other countries in East Africa.





A worker exposed to fumes after adding acid to the steel wool.

# Echoes of Gold: The People, Earth, and Price of Prosperity

BY ARTHUR NATUKUNDA

The glitter of gold has long captivated humanity a symbol of wealth, power, and beauty. In Uganda, gold has emerged as a cornerstone of the economy, ranking as the country's highest export earner, with annual exports valued at over USD 4 billion. Yet, behind this glittering statistic lies a more complex reality: much of this gold originates from artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) operations scattered across districts like Kasanda, Namayingo, Busia, Buhweju and in Karamoja sub-region, where miners, in their thousands, toil under harsh conditions to extract this precious ore.

In the heart of the central region of Uganda, Kassanda and parts of Mubende is a gold hub, where mines are mostly tucked away in sprawling rocky hills, beckoning

with promise as local miners, using all sorts of tools and machinery, dig and pan for specks of the gold dust.

## Processing Gold

Bukuya Town Council is 37 kilometers outside Mityana Town along the Kampala – Fort Portal Road. Barely seven years ago the town was a shanty countryside trading center dotted with a few buildings and retail businesses. Now a town council, it boasts of eleven elution plants where gold is processed.

Basically, elution transfers the gold from activated carbon to a solution from which the precious metal is recovered through electrolysis. The process is only complete with temperature, pressure and chemical composition for maximum results, yielding high purity gold.

A site visit in the heart of the town reveals the hazards associated

with gold processing at these facilities, where workers toil away with reckless abandon. One worker boastfully retorts that "they are used to the whole thing and don't have to mask up."

During the process, steam escapes from the vent atop one of the tanks where carbons are being subjected to extreme heat over 150°C and a high caustic solution containing sodium hydroxide and cyanide. This results into an eluate that goes through the electrolysis process. Here, an electric current is then applied to cause the gold to deposit onto cathodes (steel wool is used here).

A gold sludge, which eventually is dried and smelted into solid form (dore gold), is formed by alternately mixing the steel wool with acid and water, causing the former to literally evaporate, leaving behind a thick cloudy vapour.

## Health hazards

At the site, the process is evidently poorly managed, with workers exposed to toxic, acidic fumes; and often working without any protective gear like face and gas masks, gloves or footwear.

The exposure to these fumes leads to chronic chest complications including coughing, chest tightness, reduced lung function, nervous system effects, eye and skin irritation; while prolonged exposure results in a wide range of complications including cancer, reproductive issues, neurological disorder and organ damage. Beyond human health, the gas reacts with atmospheric moisture to form acid rain, which damages vegetation, contaminates water sources, and accelerates corrosion of mining equipment.

Women ASM leaders in the mines have raised concerns of toxic waste water that is carelessly discarded from these elution facilities into water sources through trenches.

There are also concerns of poor handling of activated carbons after the leaching process. One of the mining leaders, who has raised awareness of these dangers among duty bearers, albeit with little success, shared a case of a youthful miner who has since quit work after he sustained grievous body harm due to reckless handling of loaded carbons.

"The boy developed septic wounds wherever the chemicals had come into contact with his skin," the leader said, adding that his former bosses are currently footing his very costly medical bills.

Owing to the ignorance and/or lack of awareness on the underlying dangers associated with reckless abandonment or lack of protective gear, fears of a growing health hazard are real.

Other mining leaders have raised concerns of miners' exposure to severe respiratory illnesses like silicosis or lung cancer caused by inhaling hazardous airborne dust and chemical vapors while using drilling machines in the pits. During drilling, miners inhale fine particles that can scar lung tissue.



The steel wool after electrolysis is mixed with acid to produce gold dust.

Reports indicate a number of colleagues have succumbed to probable drilling-related complications especially over a sustained period of mining.

Field observations show that many miners are unaware of the toxicity of the reddish fumes produced during refining, often mistaking them for harmless vapor. The need



for awareness campaigns, training, and protective regulations has never been more urgent.

### Mercury: The Old Foe

Mercury remains a well-documented threat in artisanal mining communities, widely used to amalgamate gold particles from ore, a process that exposes miners to vapors during burning and contaminates water sources.

Communities around Bukuya have reported declining fish populations and increased soil toxicity, both linked to mercury runoff. Despite ongoing sensitization efforts by the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Development and environmental groups, mercury use persists due to its affordability and accessibility.



A worker opening the electrolytic cell without protective gear.

### A Path Toward Safer, Sustainable Mining

A multi-dimensional approach involving all stakeholders to mitigate these health hazards is high. These facilities for example are located

Establishing centralized refining centers equipped with proper ventilation and chemical handling systems could drastically reduce exposure to hazardous gases

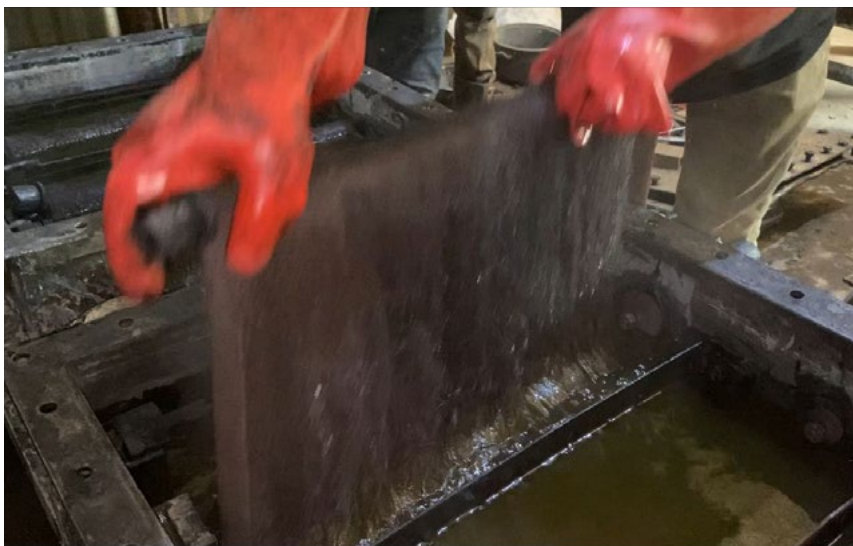
like NO<sub>2</sub>. Moreover, partnerships with universities and research institutions like Uganda Association of Artisanal and Small Scale Miners could foster innovation in safe, low-cost refining methods suitable for small-scale miners.

Equally important is health and environmental education. Miners and local communities should be trained to recognize chemical

hazards, use protective gear, and implement waste management practices that safeguard both people and ecosystems. International partners and NGOs can play a critical role in providing funding and technical expertise.

Gold has the power to uplift Uganda's economy but only if its extraction does not come at the cost of human life and environmental integrity. In Kasanda and Bukuya, the glitter of gold hides a darker side encapsulated in health hazards which manifest in the chemical burns, and the respiratory complications that shadow unregulated artisanal mining. Recognizing and addressing the dangers of Nitrogen Dioxide exposure, while continuing to combat mercury pollution, is the first step toward transforming Uganda's gold sector into a beacon of sustainable growth and safety.

Only then can the "aurora" of the mining sector truly shine not just with the gleam of gold, but with the glow of responsible progress.



Steel wool inside the electrolytic cell after undergoing electrolysis.

# UGAASM's Vision for a Sustainable Mining Industry

*The Africa Center for Energy and Mineral Policy was instrumental in founding Uganda Association of Artisanal and Small-scale Miners. These are excerpts from an interview where Mr. Don Binyina, the executive director, shares what they envisioned in 2019, and his thoughts on the trajectory of ASM.*



## Assessment of the Current Operational Environment of Artisanal Mining since UGAASM Was Formed

"The progress has been positive. Twelve years ago, there was no organization that truly brought together artisanal and small-scale miners (ASMs). During the Sustainable Management of Mineral Resources Project (SMMRP), funded by the World Bank, an association of artisanal miners was formed under Johnny Asasiirwe, but that seemed to have been a temporary effort that depended heavily on the project's lifespan. Once the project ended, the association collapsed, and it didn't effectively unify miners across different minerals or regions.

In 2019, we established UGAASM to fill that gap. Our approach was inclusive of all minerals, including development minerals, which is why regions like Northern Uganda are well represented. We also sought to include precious metals beyond just gold such as the 3Ts and other minerals. Today, we have regional representations for Karamoja, Eastern, Western, Northern, and Central Uganda, bringing together miners from across the country. Looking back six years, we've achieved significant milestones, but there is still much to do especially at the policy level to improve recognition and support for artisanal miners.

Progressively, some founding members who started as artisans have grown into small-scale miners. This growth embodies our vision artisans evolving into small,

medium, and eventually large-scale miners. We believe this progression is not only possible but essential for the development of Uganda's mining industry.

## On Developing the Sector and Legal Reforms

A lot has happened with government efforts to review policies, legal frameworks, beneficiation mechanisms, traceability systems, and the proposed mineral markets. However, a major bottleneck remains in licensing. Despite the rapid pace of policy reforms, licensing procedures are slow. Currently, only one artisanal license has been issued, recently in Abim or some part of Karamoja the first of its kind.

We must continue engaging with policymakers and the ministry. The legal framework though tested over time needs to be better understood and supported. One critical mistake was attempting to impose the same licensing terms on artisans as on large-scale miners, which is impractical given their financial constraints. Small-scale miners often operate on very tiny margins sometimes just a gram of gold over weeks and lack the equipment or resources to undertake environmental impact assessments or hire experts.

There's a need for the government to get back to the drawing board: zoning artisanal mining areas and providing extension services such as environmental management, mining technology support, and safety



protocols rather than issuing individual licenses. It's essential for the government to take charge of zones, issue work permits, and regulate activities on-site, ensuring miners can operate legally and sustainably while contributing to the formal economy.

## Community Development and Inclusion of Mining Communities

Community development within mining areas is often overlooked. For example, the deplorable conditions in Kassanda (Monitor online; July 3, 2025) highlight how mining communities are left behind living in poverty despite mining being a significant livelihood. Mining is inherently community-based on land that belongs to local communities and constitutional and legal provisions emphasize that surface rights must engage communities meaningfully. In gold mining, the issue is even more glaring. Global gold prices have soared from around \$1,500 in 2019 to over \$4,300 per ounce in 2025 yet the government in Uganda collects only a minimal tax of about \$200 per kilogram, with no royalties paid on gold. This means that the communities and landowners where gold is mined remain impoverished, receiving no benefit from this valuable resource.

I advocate for law reforms that impose a net smelter return as a royalty on refined gold at the refinery, which would benefit local communities, districts, and cultural institutions owning the land. Currently, communities get nothing despite the massive profits generated from gold exports. We have seen some positive interventions in Karamoja, where community engagement through development agreements has led to visible benefits such as schools, health facilities, and community projects highlighting the importance of involving local people in resource benefits.

## Parting Message and Future Outlook

UGAASM was founded with a vision to nationally represent artisanal and small-scale miners organizing them into a structured trade union, cooperative, and advocacy body that bridges miners, policymakers, indigenous communities, financial institutions, and development partners. We aspire for it to be the 'KACITA' of mining communities a robust platform that promotes growth, governance, and equitable sharing of mineral wealth.

We encourage regional and national representatives to work together, continue engaging with civil society, and promote the milestones achieved. For instance, some members of UGAASM have recently been issued small-scale licenses an indication of their growth from artisanal to more organized operations showing that with sustained effort, the sector can continue to develop and contribute significantly to Uganda's socioeconomic development.



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# UGAASM celebrates licensing of its associations

The Uganda Association of Artisanal and Small-scale Miners (UGAASM) hosted a cocktail in celebration of the acquisition of the Small-scale Licenses for two of its associations; Mubende United Miners' Assembly (MUMA) and Buhweju District Miners Cooperative Society (BUDIMCS) AT Serena Hotel Poolside on October 16th, 2025 in Kampala.

The celebration marked a milestone for UGAASM since its incorporation in 2019, and was attended by a host

of stakeholders that have supported the national miners' association in this journey, including ministry of energy and mineral development representatives, civil society, development partners, private sector, investors, the media and miners.

The Guest of Honour was Amb. Jan Sadek, head of the EU Delegation to Uganda, who urged that the sector needs to be regulated to benefit from development partners such as the EU.



(L-R) ACEMP ED Don Binyina; BUDMCS chairperson Bainomugisha Deus; MUMA SG Emma Kibirige; EU Amb. Jan Sadek and MUMA Chairperon JB Bukya.



planetGOLD's Lynn Gitu (2ndL) chats with a Chamber of Mines official (R).



Guests toast to prospective times ahead.



UGAASM CEO Kenneth Asiimwe in a jovial mood.





EU Amb. Jan Sadek urged regulation of the ASM sector.





MUMA public relations officer Saad Kajoba treats himself to snacks.



Guests share a happy moment.



UGAASM CEO Kenneth Asimwe (M) gestures as he chats with GIZ's Blair Ntambi (L) and another guest.





There was live band to entertain guests.



Guests having a good time.



ASM leaders relaxing away from daily hustles of work.





2nd R and 2nd L are women mining leaders from Kassanda.



Business partners were also in attendance.







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