

POLICY BRIEF

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Galamsey and Governance: Testing the Mahama Administration's Commitment to Reform



Galamsey Activity - Source: esid

Introduction

Ghana's illegal small-scale mining crisis, commonly known as galamsey, has evolved into one of the nation's most pressing environmental and political challenges. Across the country, communities are witnessing the deterioration of clean rivers into toxic channels, the disappearance of forest reserves, and the degradation of agricultural lands that have sustained livelihoods for generations. This environmental crisis has generated mounting public pressure on the government to deliver effective and immediate solutions. The ongoing and intensifying debate over declaring a state of emergency signals the severity of the situation. Yet critical questions persist about whether current approaches by the National Democratic Congress administration led by President John Dramani Mahama can adequately address the intricate web of environmental destruction, economic desperation, and institutional failures that perpetuate illegal mining.

Beyond the environmental consequences, the political dimensions of this crisis cannot be overstated. Galamsey emerged as a decisive electoral issue in the December 2024 elections, with the NDC's strong stance on environmental protection contributing significantly to their victory over the incumbent NPP administration.

Key Policy Insights

- Ghana's illegal small-scale mining crisis (galamsey) has become a major test of the Mahama administration's commitment to environmental governance, institutional reform, and political accountability.
- The scale of environmental destruction is alarming, forest reserves are being depleted, rivers contaminated with mercury, and farmlands degraded, threatening food security, biodiversity, and public health.
- Public mobilization through the 2024 "Stop Galamsey" movement has intensified national pressure, forcing the government to demonstrate visible and immediate results.
- The ongoing debate over declaring a state of emergency highlights a policy dilemma between the need for urgent action and the risk of undermining democratic principles and human rights through militarized enforcement.
- Sustainable progress requires a balanced approach, formalizing small-scale mining, providing alternative livelihoods, curbing corruption, and ensuring that mining communities benefit directly from transparent and inclusive resource governance.

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Having campaigned on promises to tackle this crisis more effectively including calling on the then government to declare a state of emergency¹ as an immediate policy action to address galamsey, the Mahama government now confronts the challenge of translating campaign rhetoric into tangible results or risk facing the same political backlash that unseated the previous government.

While the government possesses the legal and regulatory authority to combat galamsey through various mechanisms including the potential declaration of a state of emergency under Article 31 of the 1992 Constitution fundamental debates persist over the effectiveness and appropriateness of such an approach. This policy brief assesses the implications of declaring a state of emergency as a short-term response to illegal mining, while advancing long-term institutional and policy reforms necessary for sustainable environmental governance in Ghana.

The Scale of Environmental Destruction

The extent of environmental damage from galamsey provides essential context for evaluating appropriate state responses. Forest degradation has reached alarming levels, with a 2024 Forestry Commission report revealing that 34 forest reserves have been invaded by illegal miners (Forestry Commission, 2024). Satellite imagery from the Centre for Remote Sensing and Geographic Information Services (CERGIS) further indicates that forest degradation has accelerated by 400% compared to the previous decade which reflects the widespread ecosystem collapse and governance failure in natural resource protection in Ghana (CERGIS, 2024).

Beyond the loss of forest cover, water pollution represents one of the most immediate and visible threats to public health and livelihoods.

Rivers such as the Pra, Ankobra, Offin, and Birim, once vital sources of drinking water and irrigation are now heavily contaminated with mercury and other toxic substances as a result of illegal mining activities in surrounding communities. According to a Water Resources Commission report, mercury concentrations in the Pra River exceed World Health Organization (WHO) safety limits, while the Ankobra River records contamination levels more than fifteen times higher than acceptable standards (Water Resources Commission, 2025). The Birim River, which supplies water to towns such as Kyebi and Akim Oda, has also become a sediment-laden stream, significantly increasing water treatment costs and endangering aquatic ecosystems.

The crisis extends to Ghana's agricultural lands. Soil contamination from illegal mining has caused sharp declines in productivity, with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) recording a 35% drop in crop yields in affected districts, impacting 2.3 million farmers (MoFA, 2025). Similarly, research by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) shows that heavy metal concentrations exceed safe limits in 62% of farmlands near mining sites (CSIR, 2025).

The human dimension of this environmental collapse is equally alarming. The Ghana Statistical Service (GSS, 2025) reports that 89% of rural households in mining districts face deteriorating water quality, affecting an estimated 4.7 million citizens. Collectively, these trends depict an escalating environmental emergency that endangers Ghana's, food security, biodiversity, and public health, requiring urgent and coordinated policy action.

¹A state of emergency is a temporary declaration by a government that grants it special powers to respond to a crisis that threatens the nation's stability, safety, or public order.

The Public Uprising and Political Response

The transformation of galamsey from a localized concern into a national crisis triggered unprecedented public mobilization in late 2024. Environmental degradation that had long been confined to rural mining communities began affecting urban centers as water treatment facilities struggled to purify heavily contaminated sources (Parliament of Ghana, 2025). This widening impact coincided with the viral spread of photographs and videos documenting devastated rural landscapes including orange rivers, destroyed forests, and contaminated farmlands that brought the crisis directly into urban homes and galvanized city residents. The convergence of these factors created a powerful coalition of citizens demanding immediate government intervention (Reuters, 2024).

The “Stop Galamsey” movement, launched in November 2024, became a focal point for nationwide environmental advocacy and growing public frustration over the government's handling of illegal mining. Mass demonstrations in Accra and regional capitals brought together diverse groups, civil society organizations, student groups, religious bodies, and professional associations, united by shared concern for the nation's ecological future (Le Monde, 2024). The then-opposition NDC effectively leveraged this public outrage, making considerable political capital from the NPP government's perceived inability to contain the crisis (Le Monde, 2024). The movement's momentum profoundly influenced the December 2024 elections, as candidates across different political parties pledged firm action against illegal mining, effectively transforming galamsey into a national referendum on environmental governance (Reuters, 2024).

During the campaign period, then–NDC presidential candidate John Dramani Mahama, together with other senior party leaders, repeatedly urged then–President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo to declare a state of emergency in response to the environmental devastation caused by illegal mining (Le Monde, 2024).

However, since assuming office in early 2025 and despite escalating illegal mining activities President Mahama has not declared the state of emergency he previously advocated (RFI, 2025), nor has there been any visible concerted action to address the problem. The government has, however, initiated consultations with civil society organizations through the National Anti-Galamsey Stakeholder Forum and held dialogue sessions with traditional authorities and mining-affected communities, even as sections of the public and environmental activists continue to call for a state of emergency (Le Monde, 2024).

The State of Emergency Debate: Constitutional Powers And Democratic Concerns

Declaring a state of emergency under Article 31 of the 1992 Constitution would grant the government special powers to respond swiftly to the crisis. Such a declaration would allow for the deployment of security forces to affected areas, the temporary restriction of certain civil liberties within designated zones, and the issuance of emergency regulations to control or suspend mining activities in targeted regions.

Proponents of this approach, including the Ghana Coalition Against Galamsey (GCAG), the Fix the Country Movement, the Catholic Bishops' Conference, and several opposition Members of Parliament, argue that the environmental crisis has reached such severity that extraordinary measures are justified (Graphic, 2025). They contend that conventional enforcement mechanisms have demonstrably failed, as evidenced by continued environmental degradation despite years of intensified operations.

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Critics, however, including government spokespersons and ministers in President Mahama's administration, constitutional scholars, human rights organizations, and legal commentators, raise fundamental concerns about its implications for democratic governance and human rights. The Obuasi² incident serves as a stark reminder of how militarized enforcement can have devastating consequences for impoverished communities that depend on mining for their livelihoods. Critics also question whether a state of emergency would address underlying causes such as corruption within enforcement agencies, political protection for mining operations, and the economic drivers of galamsey, factors likely to persist even under emergency powers. Such measures, they argue, risk driving illegal mining further without producing sustainable solutions.

These concerns, while legitimate, must be weighed against a pragmatic reality: comprehensive, long-term strategies take time to design and implement, even as environmental destruction continues daily. A carefully structured and time-bound state of emergency could provide a temporary measure of halting destructive mining operations while the government creates the foundations for lasting reform. The key question, therefore, is not whether a state of emergency offers a perfect solution, but whether it can serve as a necessary short-term intervention within a broader phased strategy that addresses both the immediate galamsey devastation and its systemic causes.

Recommendations

Addressing Ghana's galamsey crisis demands comprehensive strategies that confront the economic and social drivers of illegal mining:

Short-Term Actions (0-12 months)

- **Deploy targeted, time-bound state of emergency:** The Mahama-led government should implement a time-limited state of emergency in the most severely affected areas, including the Pra River basin, Ankobra River region, and Atewa Forest Range, to immediately halt destructive operations while longer-term solutions are developed and implemented.
- **Intensify strategic enforcement operations:** The government should further scale-up joint military-police patrols in identified hotspot areas such as Obuasi, Dunkwa-on-Offin, Manso Nkwanta, and Prestea, with clearly defined rules of engagement designed to minimize loss of life while maintaining operational effectiveness.
- **Launch alternative employment initiatives:** In addition, the government should create immediate income opportunities through public works projects including river dredging, forest restoration, and infrastructure repairs in affected communities. These initiatives should integrate former illegal miners identified through local registration or reintegration programs, allowing them to contribute to restoration efforts that rebuild both livelihoods and ecosystems.

Medium-Term Actions (1-3 years)

- **Strengthen formalization mechanisms:** The government should enhance existing systems for legalizing small-scale mining operations through transparent licensing processes,

²In January 2025, clashes between soldiers and illegal miners at the Obuasi gold mine left several people dead and others injured, raising public concern over the militarization of anti-galamsey operations.

competitive pricing structures, and robust oversight mechanisms that make legal mining demonstrably more profitable and sustainable than illegal operations.

- **Scale alternative livelihood programs:** The government should expand youth employment schemes, agricultural modernization programs that integrate irrigation systems and improved seed varieties, and vocational training centers in mining-affected districts. In regions such as Amansie and Wassa, where crop yields have declined by 35 percent, efforts should focus on revitalizing agricultural value chains through stronger market linkages and the introduction of high-value crops suited to local conditions.
- **Build institutional capacity:** The government should invest in specialized training and logistical support to well-equip regulatory and enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and judicial officers in the fight against galamsey. These efforts should be accompanied by anti-corruption measures such as regular performance audits, asset declarations, and confidential whistleblower channels to sustain integrity in the post-emergency phase.

Long-Term Actions (3-5 years)

- **Reform mining sector governance:** The government should comprehensively strengthen the sector's regulatory framework to close existing loopholes, ensure transparent and merit-based licensing processes, and establish equitable benefit-sharing arrangements that allow mining communities to derive tangible benefits from resource extraction within their territories.
- **Ensure equitable distribution of mining revenues:** Furthermore, the government should develop transparent systems to ensure that mining revenues directly benefit

mining communities by supporting investments in infrastructure, education, healthcare, and local economic development, particularly initiatives that create jobs. Such mechanisms would reduce the economic incentives for illegal mining and promote shared prosperity in mining regions.

- **Invest in education and economic diversification:** The government, in collaboration with the private sector, should establish and strengthen technical and vocational institutes in mining regions to equip youth with skills relevant to alternative industries such as manufacturing, ecotourism, and agribusiness. These efforts should be complemented by community-driven development initiatives that expand local entrepreneurship and gradually reduce economic dependence on small-scale mining.
- **Implement comprehensive land restoration programs:** In addition, the government should initiate nationwide efforts to rehabilitate degraded lands, restore forest cover through native species reforestation, and clean up contaminated rivers using proven scientific methods. These programs should ensure active community participation to strengthen local ownership and long-term stewardship of restored ecosystems.

Conclusion

While a carefully designed, time-bound state of emergency could provide immediate relief by halting galamsey and its ensuing environmental destruction, it must be accompanied by comprehensive structural reforms. The galamsey crisis is not solely an environmental issue; it is rooted in economic deprivation, weak institutional capacity, and entrenched corruption. Addressing these interlinked challenges demands a multi-pronged approach that balances enforcement with empowerment.

To achieve lasting impact, the Mahama administration must move beyond rhetoric toward inclusive and transparent governance that rebuilds public confidence and delivers tangible results. Genuine community participation, equitable resource governance, and alternative livelihoods must anchor this process. President Mahama's success in tackling the galamsey crisis will not only determine the credibility of his administration's environmental and governance agenda but will also shape the NDC's political fortunes, as illegal mining is set to remain a defining issue in the 2028 elections. Ultimately, Ghana's ability to confront this crisis decisively will test the strength of its institutions, the depth of its leadership, and the nation's commitment to building a future where development and sustainability coexist.

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