

Exploring The Drivers Of Persistent Illegal Mining Activities In Nasarawa State.

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Abstract

Persistent illegal mining activities in Nasarawa State continue to pose serious socio-economic, environmental, and governance challenges despite existing legal and institutional frameworks. This study examines the drivers of illegal mining with the objectives of identifying the key factors sustaining the practice and assessing the influence of socio-economic and regulatory conditions on its prevalence. Guided by Political Economy Theory, the study situates illegal mining within broader structural issues such as poverty, unemployment, unequal access to resources, and weak state regulation. A mixed methods research design was adopted, combining quantitative data from structured questionnaires with qualitative insights from secondary sources including books, journals, and official documents. The findings reveal that illegal mining in Nasarawa State is driven by an interrelated set of socio-economic factors, particularly poverty, unemployment, limited alternative livelihoods, and high demand for mineral resources, indicating that no single factor operates independently. Participation in illegal mining is largely dominated by local youths, reflecting economic necessity and limited livelihood options, while other actors such as outsiders and community elites also play supporting roles. The study further establishes that socio-economic hardship significantly fuels engagement in illegal mining, while weak regulatory frameworks, ineffective enforcement, and poor governance exacerbate its persistence. Inadequate monitoring and limited community involvement in mining governance have further undermined efforts to control the activity. Based on these findings, the study recommends the implementation of sustainable livelihood programmes aimed at creating alternative income opportunities for local youths and the strengthening of mining regulations through improved enforcement, monitoring, and community participation. Addressing both economic vulnerabilities and institutional weaknesses is essential for reducing illegal mining and promoting sustainable resource governance in Nasarawa State.

Keywords: Mining, Illegal, Mineral Resources.

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I. Introduction:

Illegal mining has emerged as a persistent global challenge, particularly within resource-rich developing regions where governance structures are weak and socio-economic vulnerabilities are widespread. Across Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia, the proliferation of unregulated artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) activities has been driven by a complex interaction of poverty, unemployment, rising global demand for minerals, and limited access to formal mining licenses. The World Bank (2023) notes that ASM accounts for nearly 20 per cent of global mineral production, employing over 45 million people worldwide, yet a substantial proportion of these activities operate outside legal and regulatory frameworks. This persistence of illegality is not merely a product of individual non-compliance but reflects deeper structural failures such as weak institutional capacity, corruption, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, and exclusionary mineral governance systems. In many countries, restrictive licensing regimes and high compliance costs discourage small-scale miners from formalisation, inadvertently pushing them into illegal operations. Furthermore, global commodity price fluctuations and the growing demand for critical minerals used in renewable energy technologies have intensified informal mining activities, particularly in countries with abundant deposits but fragile regulatory environments (UNEP, 2024). The environmental and social consequences of persistent illegal mining are profound, including land degradation, water pollution, loss of biodiversity, child labour, and violent conflicts over resource control. Despite repeated global interventions aimed at formalising ASM and strengthening regulatory oversight, illegal mining continues to thrive, suggesting that its drivers are deeply embedded within global economic inequalities and governance deficits rather than isolated local behaviours.

In Nigeria, the persistence of illegal mining reflects broader national challenges related to economic hardship, governance inefficiencies, and security vulnerabilities. Nigeria possesses over 44 commercially viable solid minerals, yet the sector contributes less than one per cent to the national GDP, largely due to underdevelopment and widespread informality (Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative [NEITI], 2023). While the federal government has introduced several policy reforms, including the National Mining and Metals Policy and the establishment of the Mining Marshals to curb illegal activities, enforcement remains inconsistent. Illegal mining thrives in many states due to high unemployment, especially among youths, weak monitoring of mining sites, collusion between illegal miners and local elites, and porous borders that facilitate illicit mineral trade. According to the Federal Ministry of Solid Minerals Development (2024), illegal mining operations are often protected by powerful networks involving community leaders, security personnel, and foreign actors, making enforcement efforts politically and operationally challenging. Additionally, insecurity in rural areas, including banditry and communal conflicts, has created spaces where illegal mining flourishes with minimal state oversight. The Nigerian case illustrates how illegal mining is sustained not only by economic necessity but also by governance failures, institutional corruption, and limited community trust in state regulatory agencies. As global demand for gold, lithium, and other strategic minerals rises, Nigeria's inability to effectively regulate its mining sector has further entrenched illegal practices, undermining revenue generation, environmental sustainability, and national security (World Bank, 2023).

Nasarawa State represents one of Nigeria's most prominent hotspots of persistent illegal mining, making it a critical case study for understanding the drivers of this phenomenon. Often referred to as the "Home of Solid Minerals," Nasarawa State is endowed with abundant deposits of gold, tantalite, barite, columbite, and gemstones spread across local government areas such as Kokona, Awe, Wamba, and Nasarawa Eggon. Despite this mineral wealth, illegal mining remains widespread and deeply entrenched within host communities. The persistence of illegal mining in Nasarawa State is largely driven by chronic poverty, limited alternative livelihoods, and high youth unemployment, which compel many residents to view illegal mining as a survival strategy rather than a criminal activity. Weak regulatory presence, poor inter-agency coordination, and inadequate logistics for monitoring mining sites further exacerbate the situation. Studies indicate that community complicity, driven by short-term economic benefits and lack of awareness of environmental consequences, also sustains illegal mining operations in the state (Federal Ministry of Solid Minerals Development, 2024). Moreover, the involvement of foreign actors and the use of sophisticated mining equipment have transformed what was once subsistence-based artisanal mining into organised, profit-driven illegal enterprises. The environmental degradation, water contamination, land dispossession, and rising insecurity associated with these activities have severe implications for human security and sustainable development in Nasarawa State. Yet, despite repeated government crackdowns, illegal mining continues to resurface, highlighting the need for a deeper exploration of its underlying drivers. Understanding these drivers within the specific socio-economic, institutional, and governance context of Nasarawa State is essential for developing effective policy responses and sustainable solutions. This seminar, therefore, focuses on exploring the factors responsible for the persistence of illegal mining activities in Nasarawa State, with the aim of contributing to informed policy discourse and evidence-

Research Questions:

- (i) What are the primary factors driving persistent illegal mining activities in Nasarawa State?
- (ii) How do socio-economic and regulatory conditions influence the continuation of illegal mining in the state?

Research Objectives:

- (i) To identify and examine the key drivers of persistent illegal mining activities in Nasarawa State.
- (ii) To assess the influence of socio-economic and regulatory factors on the prevalence of illegal mining in the state.

II. Conceptual Review

Concept of Illegal Mining: Illegal mining is broadly conceptualised as the extraction of mineral resources in violation of established legal, regulatory, environmental, and safety frameworks governing the mining sector. At the international level, the World Bank (2024) defines illegal mining as any mineral exploitation activity conducted without valid licenses, outside approved mining areas, or in contravention of environmental, labour, and fiscal regulations, often characterised by informality, weak oversight, and limited accountability. This definition emphasises that illegal mining is not limited to artisanal operations alone but also includes organised and commercial-scale activities that deliberately evade state regulation, taxation, and environmental standards. The World Bank further notes that illegal mining thrives in contexts of poverty, weak institutions, high mineral demand, and governance gaps, making it both an economic survival strategy for marginalised groups and a lucrative enterprise for criminal networks. In Nigeria, the national perspective aligns closely with this international understanding but places stronger emphasis on regulatory non-compliance and national security

implications. According to the Federal Ministry of Solid Minerals Development (FMSMD, 2024), illegal mining refers to all mining activities carried out without lawful title issued by the Mining Cadastre Office, as well as operations that breach the provisions of the Nigerian Minerals and Mining Act, including failure to conduct environmental impact assessments, non-payment of royalties, use of child labour, and encroachment into restricted or community lands. The Ministry further conceptualises illegal mining as a multifaceted threat that undermines government revenue, degrades the environment, fuels rural insecurity, and weakens state authority, particularly in mineral-rich states such as Nasarawa. Both definitions converge on the view that illegal mining is not merely a technical or administrative offence but a complex socio-economic and governance challenge with far-reaching developmental consequences. While the World Bank frames illegal mining within a global development and sustainability discourse, the Nigerian national definition situates it within the context of regulatory failure, community vulnerability, and internal security risks. Taken together, these perspectives highlight illegal mining as an activity rooted in structural inequality and weak governance, requiring coordinated legal, economic, and institutional responses rather than isolated enforcement measures.

Socio-Economic Drivers of Illegal Mining: Illegal mining is primarily driven by deep-seated socio-economic challenges that continue to affect many mineral-rich developing countries, particularly in Africa. One of the most significant drivers is widespread poverty and unemployment, especially in rural and peri-urban communities. In contexts where agriculture is increasingly unviable due to climate variability, land degradation, and poor access to credit, illegal mining becomes a survival strategy. The World Bank (2023) notes that artisanal and illegal mining absorbs millions of unskilled and semi-skilled workers who lack access to formal employment, making it an attractive livelihood option despite its risks and illegality.

Closely linked to poverty is the failure of inclusive economic development and weak state presence in mining regions. Many mining communities experience chronic neglect in terms of infrastructure, education, healthcare, and social protection. According to UNDP (2024), such structural marginalisation creates conditions where local populations perceive illegal mining as a legitimate means of accessing natural wealth that offers immediate financial returns, even when long-term environmental and health costs are severe. Weak governance and corruption further reinforce this dynamic, as regulatory agencies often lack the capacity or political will to enforce mining laws consistently. Another critical driver is the high global demand and rising prices of mineral resources, particularly gold, lithium, and other strategic minerals. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2024) observes that global market pressures incentivise informal extraction, as illegal supply chains can quickly respond to demand without bearing regulatory or environmental compliance costs. Middlemen and transnational actors exploit this informality, while local miners receive minimal returns relative to the value of extracted minerals. In Nigeria, illegal mining is also shaped by policy gaps and limited formalisation of artisanal mining. NEITI (2023) highlights that complex licensing procedures, high registration costs, and inadequate support for small-scale miners push many operators outside the legal framework. Consequently, illegal mining persists as an economically rational choice for marginalised populations seeking income, reinforcing cycles of insecurity, environmental degradation, and human vulnerability. Illegal mining is less a criminal anomaly than a socio-economic response to poverty, exclusion, weak governance, and global resource pressures. Addressing these drivers requires integrated policies that combine livelihood diversification, mining sector reform, and community-centred development.

Governance and Regulatory Framework in the Mining Sector: The governance and regulatory framework in the mining sector refers to the institutional, legal, and policy arrangements through which governments regulate mineral resource extraction to ensure transparency, accountability, environmental sustainability, and socio-economic benefits for host communities. Internationally, recent frameworks emphasise responsible mining governance anchored on rule of law, clear licensing regimes, environmental safeguards, community participation, and revenue transparency, reflecting global standards promoted by multilateral development institutions in 2024–2025. These standards stress that effective governance reduces illegal mining, strengthens investor confidence, and ensures that mineral wealth contributes to sustainable development rather than conflict and environmental degradation. In Nigeria, the regulatory framework for the mining sector is guided by federal oversight under the Minerals and Mining Act and implemented through institutions such as the Ministry of Solid Minerals Development and the Nigerian Mining Cadastre Office, with sub-national structures supporting monitoring and compliance. Current national regulatory approaches focus on formalising artisanal mining, enforcing environmental impact assessments, strengthening security around mining sites, and improving inter-agency coordination to curb illegal operations. Recent state-level regulatory frameworks, aligned with federal laws, highlight transparency in licensing, environmental protection, and community engagement as core governance principles. Collectively, contemporary international and Nigerian perspectives (2024–2025) show that robust governance and regulation in the mining sector are critical for balancing economic growth, human security, and environmental sustainability, particularly in resource-rich but governance-challenged contexts.

Community Dynamics and Market Forces in Illegal Mining: Community dynamics play a central role in sustaining illegal mining across many resource-rich developing regions. In mining-affected communities, illegal mining is often embedded within local social and economic structures, where poverty, unemployment, and weak state presence make informal extraction a viable livelihood option. Local youths, migrant laborers, and artisanal miners frequently collaborate with community elites, landowners, and informal security actors who provide access to land and protection in exchange for rents. These relationships create a form of social legitimacy for illegal mining, despite its environmental and security consequences. In West Africa, experiences from countries such as Ghana and Nigeria show that community tolerance is reinforced by perceptions of state neglect and inequitable benefit sharing from formal mining operations, leading residents to prioritize short-term survival over long-term environmental sustainability (Africanews, 2024;). As a result, community resistance to enforcement efforts is common, particularly when crackdowns are perceived as targeting livelihoods rather than addressing structural drivers of informality.

Market forces further intensify illegal mining by linking local extraction sites to global commodity demand. Rising international prices for gold, lithium, and other strategic minerals have expanded informal supply chains, attracting foreign buyers, middlemen, and transnational networks that easily absorb illegally mined resources into formal markets. In Nigeria, the growing global demand for lithium and gold has increased incentives for unregulated extraction in rural communities, where weak monitoring allows illegal production to flourish alongside legitimate investments (Africanews, 2024;). These market pressures distort local economies, shift labor away from agriculture, and fuel competition and insecurity within communities. Ultimately, the interaction between community-level survival strategies and global market demand creates a self-reinforcing cycle that sustains illegal mining, undermines governance, and complicates

III. Theory: Political Economy Theory Of Natural Resources

Author: Karl Marx (1867), later advanced by scholars such as Paul Collier and Michael Watts

The Political Economy Theory explains illegal mining as a product of structural inequalities, weak institutions, and unequal access to resources. It assumes that poverty, unemployment, elite capture, and poor governance push marginalized populations into informal and illegal economic activities for survival. The theory further posits that state failure in regulation and enforcement allows illegal exploitation of resources to persist. This theory is highly relevant to the study of persistent illegal mining in Nasarawa State, as it explains how socio-economic deprivation, high mineral demand, and weak regulatory frameworks jointly sustain illegal mining activities.

IV. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methods research design combining quantitative and secondary data approaches. Primary quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to residents and key stakeholders in selected mining communities in Nasarawa State. The questionnaires captured socio-economic and regulatory factors influencing illegal mining activities. Secondary data were sourced from relevant books, academic journals, government reports, magazines, and policy documents. The mixed methods approach enabled triangulation of data, thereby improving the reliability, validity, and depth of analysis of the drivers of persistent illegal mining in the study area.

V. Data Presentation And Analysis

Objective 1: To identify and examine the key drivers of persistent illegal mining activities in Nasarawa State

Table 1 Main Reasons for Illegal Mining Activities in Respondents' Communities in Nasarawa State

S/N	What do you consider the main reasons for illegal mining activities in your community?	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Poverty	20	6.92
2	Unemployment	30	10.38
3	Lack of alternative livelihoods	30	10.38
4	High demand for minerals	9	3.11
5	All of the above	200	69.20
T		289	100

Source: Researcher Field Experience 2026

The data in Table 1 reveal that illegal mining in Nasarawa State is largely driven by a combination of socio-economic factors. A majority of respondents (69.20%) identified “all of the above”—poverty, unemployment, lack of alternative livelihoods, and high demand for minerals—as the main reasons, indicating that these factors collectively motivate participation in illegal mining. Individually, unemployment and lack of alternative livelihoods each accounted for 10.38%, poverty 6.92%, and high demand for minerals 3.11%. This

suggests that while structural economic challenges are significant, the interplay of multiple factors intensifies the prevalence of illegal mining within communities.

Table 2 Key Participants in Illegal Mining Activities in Respondents' Communities

S/N	Who are the main participants in illegal mining activities in your community?	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Local youths	200	69.20
2	Outsiders/migrants	30	10.38
3	Community elites	30	10.38
4	Family members	10	3.46
5	Others	19	6.57
Total		289	100

Source: Researcher Field Experience 2026

Table 2 shows that local youths are the dominant participants in illegal mining activities in Nasarawa State, accounting for 69.20% of respondents' reports. Outsiders or migrants and community elites each represent 10.38%, indicating some involvement from non-residents and influential local figures. Family members and other unspecified participants account for smaller proportions, 3.46% and 6.57% respectively. These findings suggest that illegal mining is largely driven by the younger population, while social networks and external actors also play a role, reflecting both economic pressures and community dynamics in sustaining the practice.

Objective 2: To assess the influence of socio-economic and regulatory factors on the prevalence of illegal mining in the state

Table 3. Influence of Socio-Economic Factors on Illegal Mining in Respondents' Communities

S/N	How do socio-economic factors such as poverty and unemployment influence illegal mining in your community?	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Strong influence	250	86.51
2	Moderate influence	10	3.46
3	Weak influence	20	6.92
4	No influence	9	3.11
Total		289	100

Source: Researcher Field Experience 2026

Table 3 indicates that socio-economic factors, particularly poverty and unemployment, strongly influence illegal mining in Nasarawa State, with 86.51% of respondents affirming a strong impact. A smaller proportion perceived a moderate influence (3.46%) or weak influence (6.92%), while only 3.11% believed these factors have no effect. This highlights that economic hardships and lack of viable livelihood opportunities are key drivers of illegal mining activities in the communities. The data underscore the critical role of socio-economic conditions in shaping participation in illegal mining, suggesting that addressing poverty and unemployment could significantly reduce its prevalence.

Table 4 Perceived Effectiveness of Government Regulations and Enforcement in Controlling Illegal Mining

S/N	How effective do you consider government regulations and enforcement in controlling illegal mining in your community?	Number of Respondents	Percentage
1	Very effective	50	17.30
2	Effective	20	6.92
3	Ineffective	200	69.20
4	Very ineffective	19	6.57
Total		289	100

Source: Researcher Field Experience 2026

Table 4 reveals that the majority of respondents (69.20%) perceive government regulations and enforcement in controlling illegal mining as ineffective, while 6.57% consider them very ineffective. Only a small proportion view the measures positively, with 17.30% rating them very effective and 6.92% effective. These findings suggest widespread dissatisfaction with regulatory efforts and enforcement mechanisms, indicating that existing policies and interventions are largely failing to curb illegal mining activities in Nasarawa State. The results highlight the need for stronger enforcement, better policy implementation, and community-inclusive strategies to enhance compliance and effectively address the challenges of illegal mining.

VI. Discussion Of Findings Base On The Research Objectives

The findings from Tables 1 and 2 indicate that illegal mining in Nasarawa State is primarily driven by a complex interplay of socio-economic factors. A substantial majority of respondents (69.20%) attributed illegal mining to a combination of poverty, unemployment, lack of alternative livelihoods, and high demand for minerals, highlighting that no single factor operates in isolation. Individually, unemployment and limited livelihood options each accounted for 10.38%, while poverty and high mineral demand contributed less, demonstrating the structural economic pressures underlying the practice. In terms of participation, local youths dominate illegal mining activities, representing 69.20% of actors, while outsiders, community elites, and family members play smaller yet notable roles. These findings underscore that persistent illegal mining is fueled by both economic necessity and social dynamics within communities.

The findings indicate that the prevalence of illegal mining in Nasarawa State is strongly influenced by socio-economic and regulatory factors. Table 3 shows that 86.51% of respondents perceive poverty and unemployment as having a strong impact on illegal mining, highlighting economic hardship and limited livelihood opportunities as primary drivers. Concurrently, Table 4 reveals widespread dissatisfaction with government interventions, as 69.20% of respondents consider regulations and enforcement ineffective, with an additional 6.57% rating them very ineffective. Together, these results suggest that while socio-economic pressures fuel participation in illegal mining, weak regulatory frameworks and poor enforcement exacerbate the problem, underscoring the need for integrated economic and policy solutions.

Summary: The findings reveal that illegal mining in Nasarawa State is driven by a combination of socio-economic pressures and weak regulatory frameworks. A majority of respondents (69.20%) linked illegal mining to poverty, unemployment, lack of alternative livelihoods, and high mineral demand, with local youths constituting the dominant participants. Economic hardship is further emphasized, as 86.51% perceive poverty and unemployment as major contributors. Simultaneously, dissatisfaction with government interventions is widespread, with 69.20% rating enforcement as ineffective, highlighting the role of weak regulation. Overall, the persistence of illegal mining reflects intertwined economic necessity, social dynamics, and institutional deficiencies, necessitating integrated policy and livelihood solutions.

VII. Recommendation

Based on the findings, two key recommendations are:

- 1. Implement Sustainable Livelihood Programs:** The government and development agencies should create alternative employment and income-generating opportunities for local youths, such as skills training, microfinance support, and agricultural or artisanal initiatives, to reduce economic reliance on illegal mining.
- 2. Strengthen Regulatory Frameworks and Enforcement:** Authorities should enhance monitoring, regulation, and enforcement of mining laws, ensuring effective penalties for illegal activities, while engaging communities in participatory governance to improve compliance and address the widespread perception of weak enforcement.

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