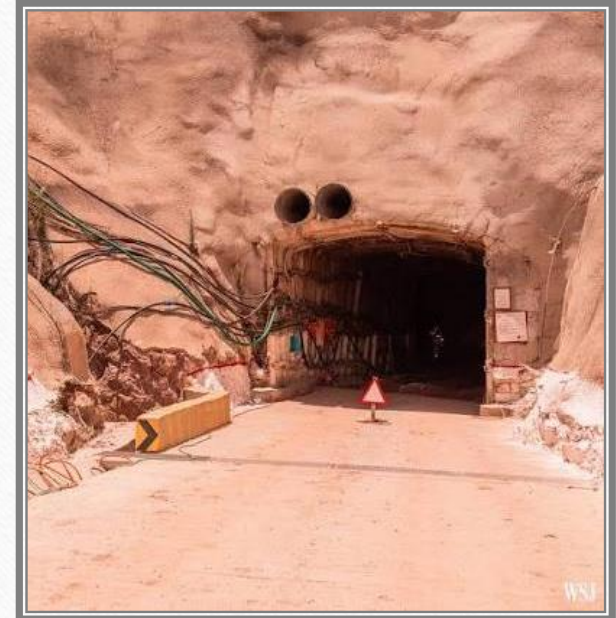


From "Zama Zamas" to Sustainable Livelihoods

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Agenda overview

- Understanding illegal mining (Zama Zamas)
- Social and economic drivers
- Impacts on communities
- Youth vulnerability and unemployment
- Case studies
- Recommendations
- Conclusion



Context of Illegal Mining in Johannesburg

Historical Background

- Gold discovered in Johannesburg in 1886.
- Mining shaped the city's growth and economy.
- Thousands (6000) of abandoned and ownerless mines remain.
- Rising gold prices increase illegal mining activities.

Current Situation

- Organized criminal syndicates dominate operations.
- Illegal mining extends underground and on surface dumps.
- Significant social and environmental consequences.



Who Are the Zama Zamas?

Understanding the Phenomenon

Zama zamas are informal, unregulated artisanal miners in South Africa who extract precious minerals-primarily gold from abandoned or closed-off commercial mines. The name derives from an isiZulu phrase that loosely translates to "take a chance" or "keep on trying."

- Unemployed South African youth
- Undocumented migrants
- Former mineworkers
- Criminal syndicates
- Local community members seeking survival income

Root Causes of Illegal Mining Structural Factors

Economic Factors

- Extreme youth unemployment (58–69%) 15-24 years
- Poverty
- Income inequality
- Limited economic opportunities

Social Factors

- Social exclusion
- Migration pressures
- Family responsibilities

Governance Factors

- Abandoned mines
- Weak regulation
- Corruption
- Limited formalization pathways



Impact on Communities

Social Consequences

- Increased violence
- Human trafficking
- Drug abuse
- Gender-based violence

Community Effects

- Fear and insecurity
- Breakdown of social cohesion
- Distrust of authorities

Social Work Concern

- Communities become trapped in cycles of vulnerability.



Public Health Impacts

Health Risks

- Exposure to toxic chemicals
- Dust inhalation
- Respiratory illnesses
- Injuries and fatalities

Mental Health

- Trauma
- Anxiety
- Substance dependence

Social Work Role

- Psychosocial support
- Trauma-informed interventions
- Community health advocacy



Environmental Impacts

Environmental Damage

- Water contamination
- Soil degradation
- Sinkholes
- Destruction of natural spaces

Impact on Communities

- Unsafe water
- Reduced agricultural potential
- Increased health risks

Social Justice Issue

Environmental harm disproportionately affects poor communities

Youth and Illegal Mining

Why Youth Are Vulnerable

- High unemployment
- School dropout
- Lack of opportunities
- Peer influence

Risk Factors

- Recruitment into syndicates
- Drug abuse
- Violence exposure

Social Work Focus

- Youth empowerment rather than criminalization.



A dark, grainy photograph of a person in a trench, wearing a light-colored jacket and pants, with a backpack. The person is standing in a deep, earthen trench. The image is framed by a white border, and the text "GENERATE SOLUTIONS" is overlaid in white, serif, all-caps font. A thin white horizontal line is positioned above the text. The entire image is set against a light brown, textured background that resembles a book cover, with two dark brown horizontal bands on the left and right sides.

GENERATE SOLUTIONS

Case Study 1 – Stilfontein Mining Crisis

- ✓ The Stilfontein mining crisis was an extended siege at an abandoned gold mine in North West province. Beginning in August 2024, police used an Operation Vala Umgodi strategy to seal off shafts and block supplies, starving out an estimated thousands of undocumented illegal miners (zama zamas) to force their surrender.
- ✓ Following a court order in January 2025 to clear the underground shafts, authorities and rescue teams retrieved hundreds of survivors and at least 78 bodies. The weeks-long standoff sparked widespread human rights outrage and a national inquiry by the [South African Human Rights Commission](#).

Hundreds of illegal miners trapped underground.

- Humanitarian concerns emerged.
- Complex interaction between law enforcement and human rights.

Lessons Learned

- Enforcement alone is insufficient.
- Need for rehabilitation pathways.
- Community engagement is essential.

Social Work Insight

Balance public safety and human dignity.

Why Enforcement Alone Fails

Traditional Response

- Arrests
- Military operations
- Border control

Challenges

- Poverty remains
- Syndicates adapt
- New recruits emerge

Social Work Principle

- Address root causes rather than symptoms.

Case Study 2: Ghana's Artisanal Mining Formalization

Ghana's Approach

- Government initiatives:
- Licensing small-scale miners
- Technical support
- Cooperative models
- Environmental monitoring

Outcomes

- Reduced illegal activities
- Increased tax revenue
- Better worker protection

Lesson for Johannesburg

Formalization can reduce criminality.

Recommendations: Community-Based Environmental Rehabilitation

This approach focuses on repairing the environmental damage caused by illegal mining while creating employment opportunities for local residents.

Green Employment Opportunities

- Many communities affected by illegal mining experience high levels of unemployment, especially among young people. Instead of viewing youth as part of the problem, they can become part of the solution through **green jobs** that contribute to environmental restoration.

Young people can be employed to:

Rehabilitate mine dumps by stabilising and reshaping abandoned mining areas to reduce dust pollution and health risks.

Restore wetlands that have been damaged by mining activities, helping to improve biodiversity and water storage capacity.

Monitor water quality in rivers, streams, and groundwater sources affected by mining pollution, ensuring early detection of contamination.

Reclaim degraded land through vegetation planting, soil restoration, and erosion control measures, making the land safe and productive again.

Triple Benefit

- ✓ Jobs
- ✓ Environmental protection
- ✓ Community ownership

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Formalising Artisanal Mining

Recommended Strategy

Create:

- Legal small-scale mining permits
- Mining cooperatives
- Training centres
- Safety certification systems

Benefits

- Job creation
- Revenue generation
- Better monitoring
- Reduced criminal influence

Conclusion

- Illegal mining is not only a law enforcement issue.
- It is:
- A social justice issue
- A youth unemployment issue
- A community development issue
- A sustainable development issue

Thank You