



NATIONAL ASSEMBLY LIBRARY TRUST FUND

RESEARCH DEPARTMENT

THEMATIC AREA: SECURITY AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

A REVIEW OF ILLEGAL MINING IN CONNECTION WITH INSECURITY IN NIGERIA

BY

ERU, EKA JOHN

HEAD OF UNIT

SECURITY AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

EDITION: NALTF/SCR/009 VOLUME 1

Year of Publication: 2025

A REVIEW OF ILLEGAL MINING IN CONNECTION WITH INSECURITY IN NIGERIA

Abstract

Illegal mining in Nigeria has become one of the country's most urgent socio-economic and security challenges. Despite its abundant mineral resources, weak regulatory enforcement, high poverty levels, and poor governance have led to an informal mining economy. This study investigates how illegal mining contributes to insecurity, economic losses, and environmental damage. Using secondary data, reports, and statistical trends, the paper shows that illegal mining is strongly connected to the activities of armed non-state actors, environmental disasters, and revenue losses for the country. Findings indicate annual losses of about ₦41.1 billion and up to US\$9 billion resulting from smuggling and unregulated extraction. The paper concludes that a coordinated national response focusing on regulation, community involvement, security coordination, and sustainable development is essential for Nigeria's long-term stability.

Keywords: Illegal mining, insecurity, Nigeria, environment, regulation, artisanal mining.

Introduction

Nigeria is rich in over 44 commercially viable mineral resources, such as gold, lithium, tin, columbite, and coal. With the right strategies in place, these resources could significantly contribute to the country's economic growth. However, the potential is currently hindered by widespread illegal mining activities. This form of mining, often referred to as unlicensed artisanal mining, involves the extraction of minerals without proper legal permits or in disregard of environmental and safety regulations.

States like Zamfara, Kaduna, Niger, Osun, and Plateau have seen a notable increase in illegal mining practices. According to reports by Vanguard (2025), more than 80 percent of mining operations in Zamfara are unregulated. Additionally, the northern region is grappling with rising insecurity, including issues like banditry, kidnapping, and terrorism. This situation highlights the intricate relationship between resource exploitation and armed violence.

Recognizing these challenges, the Nigerian government, through the Ministry of Solid Minerals Development, is actively working to address the links between illegal mining and national insecurity. It is estimated that armed groups use proceeds from unregulated mineral sales to fund their activities. By developing stronger regulatory frameworks and enhancing enforcement, the government can mitigate these issues. Addressing illegal mining not only protects the environment but also lays the groundwork for sustainable development and security, ultimately benefiting the nation as a whole.

The objectives of this research are therefore to:

1. Identify the drivers of illegal mining in Nigeria.
2. Examine the connection between illegal mining and insecurity.
3. Analyse the socio-economic and environmental implications.
4. Propose sustainable strategies to mitigate its impact.

Literature Review

Conceptual Overview

Illegal mining, often referred to as artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) when done informally, typically involves individuals using basic tools to extract minerals. According to Veriv Africa (2025), while informal mining can contribute to rural livelihoods, it becomes "illegal" when it violates licensing laws, safety regulations, or environmental standards.

Drivers of Illegal Mining

Key factors include:

- **Poverty and unemployment:** Mining becomes a survival strategy for rural populations.
- **Weak regulatory institutions:** Corruption, overlapping jurisdiction between federal and state agencies, and a lack of equipment hinder effective oversight.
- **High profitability of minerals:** Gold and lithium demand make illicit mining attractive.
- **Security vacuum:** Armed groups exploit ungoverned spaces to control mining fields.
- **Inadequate data and geological mapping:** Poor information on reserves encourages uncontrolled exploration.

Economic, Environmental, and Security Perspectives

Experts such as Onifade (2022) and Ibrahim (2023) emphasize the importance of addressing the challenges posed by illegal mining, which can result in revenue loss, deter investment, and encourage smuggling. The Guardian (2024) points out that unregulated mining practices negatively impact farmland and lead to the contamination of rivers with harmful substances like mercury and lead. To tackle these issues, it is crucial to promote better regulation and management of mining activities. Additionally, addressing the underlying causes of insecurity can help mitigate competition among armed groups and local militias over valuable resources. By fostering sustainable practices in the mining sector, we can protect our environment and communities while ensuring economic growth.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the **Resource-Conflict Nexus Theory** and the **Fragile-State Livelihood Framework**.

- The resource-conflict nexus suggests that abundant resources in weakly governed areas fuel conflict.
- The fragile-state framework explains how the absence of legitimate livelihoods drives communities to informal economies such as illegal mining.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach, enriched by secondary quantitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The data were gathered from a variety of credible sources, including:

- Reports from the Federal Ministry of Solid Minerals Development (2024–2025)
- Reputable newspapers, such as Vanguard, The Guardian, and the Nigerian Observer
- Verified online mining and policy platforms, including NigerianMining.com and Veriv Africa
- Scholarly articles published from 2018 to 2025

To effectively convey the findings, we have employed analytical tools such as descriptive tables, pie charts, and bar graphs, which illustrate the significant impacts of losses, arrests, and geographical distribution related to illegal mining.

It is important to note the limitations of this research. The informal nature of illegal mining poses challenges to data reliability, as some figures are estimates rather than verified statistics. Nevertheless, by triangulating information from multiple credible sources, we enhance the validity and robustness of our conclusions, paving the way for informed discussions and future research in this area.

Results and Discussion

Scale and Distribution of Illegal Mining

Region	Major States	Main Minerals	Estimated Illegal Activity (%)
North-West	Zamfara, Kaduna, Niger	Gold, Lithium	80–90
North-Central	Kogi, Nasarawa, Kwara	Iron Ore, Tin	60
South-West	Osun, Oyo, Ogun	Gold, Quartz	40
South-East	Ebonyi, Enugu	Lead, Zinc	45

(Source: Nigerian Mining Cadastre Office, 2025)

Observation: Illegal mining is most concentrated in the North-West, where insecurity is also highest.

Economic Impact

Nigeria reportedly loses about **₦41.1 billion annually** to illegal mining (Nigerian Observer, 2025) and nearly **US\$9 billion** to gold smuggling (Veriv Africa, 2025).

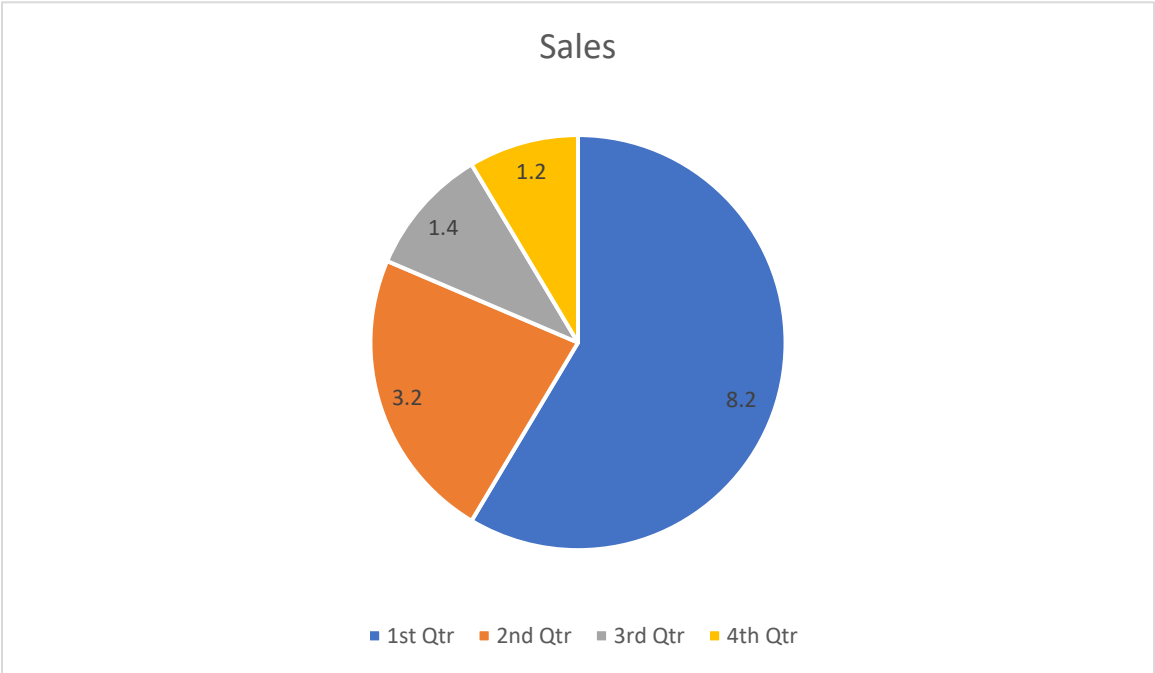
Table 2: Estimated Annual Economic Losses (₦ Billions)

Source of Loss	Estimated Value (₦ Billion)	Percentage Share	
Gold Smuggling	3 000	73 %	
Unpaid Royalties & Taxes	700	17 %	
Environmental Remediation Costs	300	7 %	

Other Mineral Losses	200	3 %	
Total	4 200	100 %	

(Derived from 2024–2025 media and government data.)

Figure 1: Pie Chart – Distribution of Economic Losses



The Mining Marshals’ 2025 report confirmed **327 arrests** and **98 site recoveries**; however, unlicensed mining continues to occur across rural zones.

Environmental and Social Impacts

Illegal mining produces severe ecological consequences:

Impact	Description	Example
Soil & Land Degradation	Unreclaimed pits, erosion, and deforestation	Zamfara Gold Fields
Water Pollution	Mercury/lead contamination	Lead Poisoning (2010 Zamfara)
Air Pollution	Dust from excavation	Jos Plateau
Loss of Farmland	Crops displaced by pits	Osun State
Child Labour	Minors in hazardous conditions	Niger & Kaduna

Figure 2: Bar Chart – Reported Environmental Incidents (2020–2024)

Year Recorded Incidents

2020 45

2021 63

2022 70

2023 82

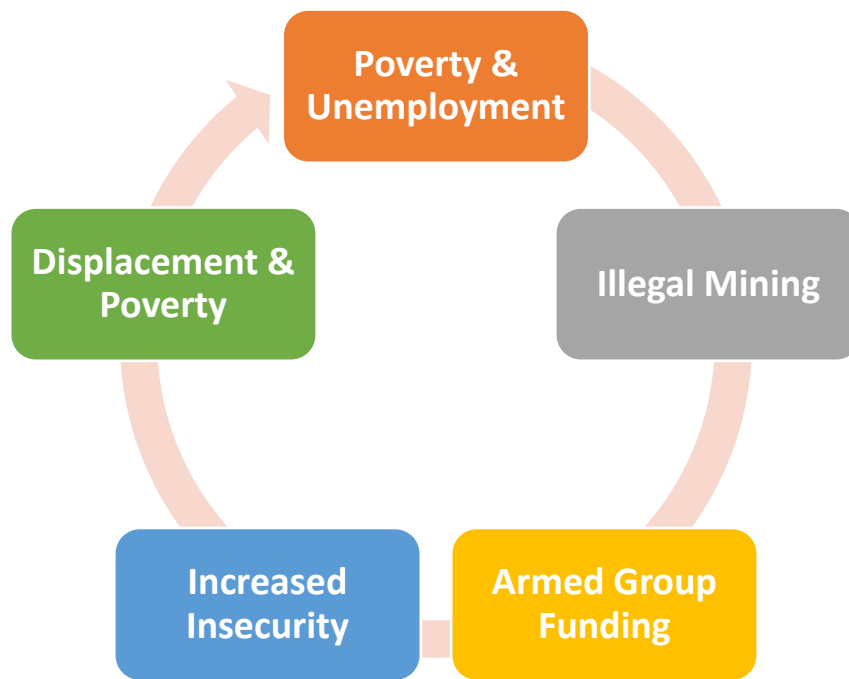
2024 97

Trend → Sharp increase in environmental incidents, correlating with the growth of illegal mining.

Illegal Mining and Insecurity Nexus

The North-West region highlights the complex relationship between illegal mining and insecurity. According to reports from Vanguard (2025), more than 60 percent of bandit camps are situated near gold mining sites. To address this issue, it is essential to develop strategies that reduce the control armed groups have over these mines and to eliminate the taxes they impose on miners in the form of protection fees. Additionally, creating alternative avenues for investment can redirect profits from activities like kidnapping and cattle rustling, promoting safer and more sustainable economic practices in the region. By focusing on these solutions, we can break the cycle of crime and resource exploitation and foster a more secure environment for local communities.

Figure 3: Flow Diagram – The Illegal Mining–Insecurity Cycle



The *Nigerian Security Tracker (2025)* records a 30 percent overlap between mining zones and banditry incidents, especially in Zamfara and Niger States.

Challenges in Addressing Illegal Mining

1. Strengthening Institutions: Enhancing resources and support for regulatory agencies can improve their effectiveness.
2. Promoting Transparency: Addressing corruption and fostering accountability among officials can help protect legitimate operators and ensure fair practices.

3. Improving Coordination: Streamlining federal, state, and local mandates can lead to more efficient regulatory oversight.
4. Enhancing Accessibility: Developing better surveillance methods for remote mining sites in forests and hills can increase oversight and safety.
5. Supporting Alternative Livelihoods: Creating opportunities for individuals reliant on mining can help diversify incomes and facilitate more effective enforcement of regulations.

5. The Way Forward / Recommendations

Enhancing Legal Frameworks

- Implement a robust licensing system with clear regulations and appropriate penalties for non-compliance.
- Revise the Minerals and Mining Act (2007) to incorporate community involvement and provisions for environmental restitution.

Strengthening Institutional Capacity

- Equip Mining Marshals with advanced tools such as drones, GPS technology, and modern data systems to improve oversight and efficiency.
- Transform mineral record management by digitizing information through the Mining Cadastral Office.

Integrating Security for Sustainable Mining

- Approach illegal mining as a critical national security concern to foster a safer mining environment.
- Create a Joint Task Force on Mining Security, bringing together law enforcement, military, and civil defense to enhance collaborative efforts.

Fostering Community Engagement and Livelihood Opportunities

- Establish cooperative licensing for artisanal miners to promote fairness and sustainability in local mining practices.
- Offer micro-credit options and training focused on safe mining techniques and environmental responsibility to empower communities.

Promoting Environmental Remediation

- Launch a National Mine Closure Fund dedicated to rehabilitating and restoring degraded mining sites for future use.
- Initiate continuous health monitoring initiatives in polluted areas to safeguard community well-being.

Advancing Data Transparency and Regional Partnerships

- Collaborate with ECOWAS member states to implement effective cross-border tracking of mineral exports, strengthening regional cooperation.
- Commit to the annual publication of verified mining data, fostering accountability and trust in the mining sector.

Conclusion

Illegal mining remains a critical challenge threatening Nigeria's economic diversification and national security. Its persistence stems from poverty, corruption, and weak governance. The direct link between resource exploitation and insecurity especially in the North-West underscores the need for a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach.

If effectively regulated, Nigeria's mining sector could provide sustainable employment, generate billions in revenue, and reduce the influence of armed non-state actors. Genuine political will, transparency, and community-centred development must therefore underpin any sustainable solution.

7. References

Brand Spur NG. (2025, September 3). *How illegal mining threatens Nigeria's economic*

diversification dream. <https://brandspurng.com/2025/09/03/how-illegal-mining-threatens-nigerias-economic-diversification-dream/>

Independent Nigeria. (2025, March 21). *Mining marshals crack down on illegal miners, recover*

98 sites – Alake. <https://independent.ng/one-year-on-mining-marshals-crack-down-on-illegal-miners-recover-98-sites-alake/>

Nigerian Observer. (2025, August 21). *Nigeria loses ₦41.1 bn annually to illegal mining,*

stakeholders warn.

<https://nigerianobservernews.com/2025/08/nigeria-loses-n41-1bn-annually-to-illegal-mining-stakeholders-warn/>

NigerianMining.com. (n.d.). *How illegal mining is affecting Nigeria's economy and*

environment.

<https://nigerianmining.com/how-illegal-mining-is-affecting-nigerias-economy-and-environment/>

Reuters. (2024, April 24). *Nigeria revokes 924 dormant mining titles, seeks new investors.*

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigeria-revokes-924-dormant-mining-titles-seeks-new-investors-2024-04-24/>

The Cable. (n.d.). *How illegal mining is sabotaging the Nigerian economy.*

<https://www.thecable.ng/how-illegal-mining-is-sabotaging-the-nigerian-economy/>

Vanguard Newspapers. (2025, January 6). *How illegal mining fuels insecurity in the North – Investigation.*

<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/01/how-illegal-mining-fuels-insecurity-in-the-north-2/>

Vanguard Newspapers. (2025, March 3). *Nigeria loses trillions to illegal miners – FG.*

<https://www.vanguardngr.com/2025/03/nigeria-loses-trillions-to-illegal-miners-fg/>

Veriv Africa. (2025). *How Illegal Mining Threatens Nigeria’s Economic Diversification Dream.*

<https://www.verivafrika.com/insights/how-illegal-mining-threatens-nigerias-economic-diversification-dream/>

Appendices (Charts & Infographics)

Appendix A: Map of Illegal Mining Hotspots in Nigeria
(Adapted from Mining Cadastre Office 2025)

Appendix B: Pie Chart – Distribution of Economic Losses
(Created by author using 2025 data)

Appendix C: Bar Chart – Reported Environmental Incidents (2020–2024)

Appendix D: Flow Diagram – Illegal Mining–Insecurity Cycle

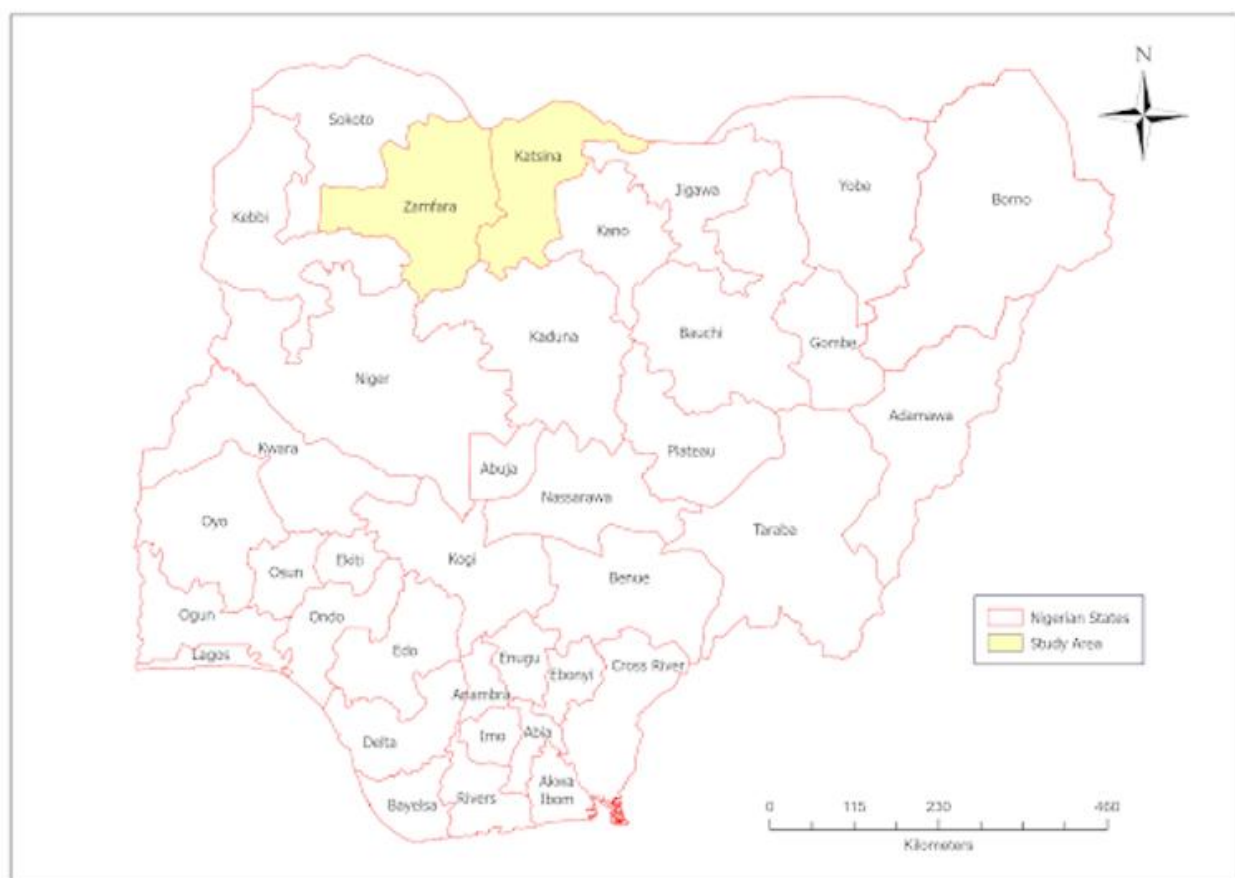
Appendices (Charts & Infographics)

Results and Discussion

Scope and Geographical Spread



Appendix A: Map of Illegal Mining Hotspots in Nigeria
(Adapted from Mining Cadastre Office 2025)





Appendix C: Bar Chart – Reported Environmental Incidents (2020–2024)

It is reported that in the North-West states such as Zamfara, Kaduna, and Niger, **over 80% of mining activities** are illegal/artisanal. [Vanguard News](#)

For example, the government has seized and estimated losses of “trillions” of naira due to illegal mining in some states. [Vanguard News](#)

The regional concentration is significant because these states combine mineral endowments (especially gold) and entrenched insecurity/weak governance.

High cost of South Africa's **illegal mining**

enact

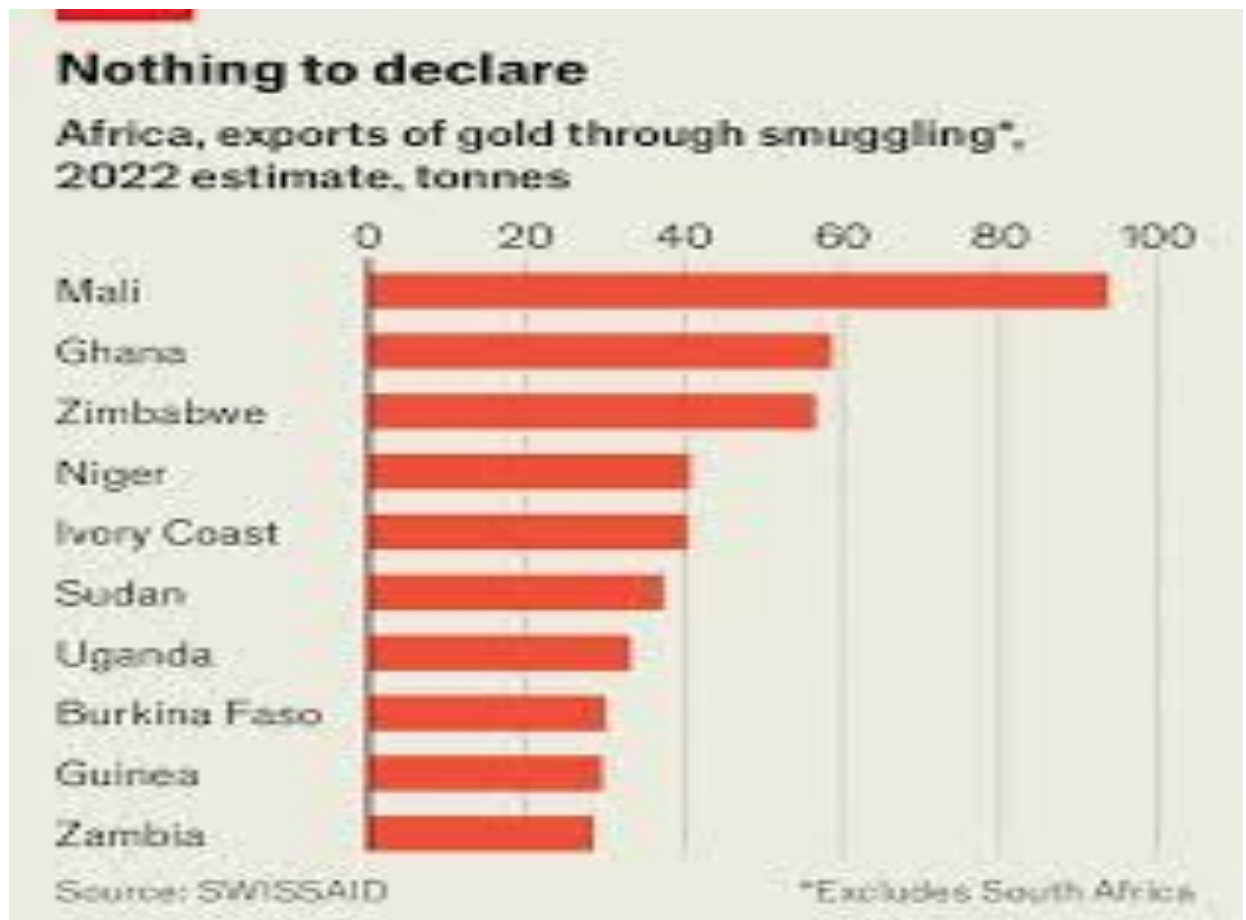
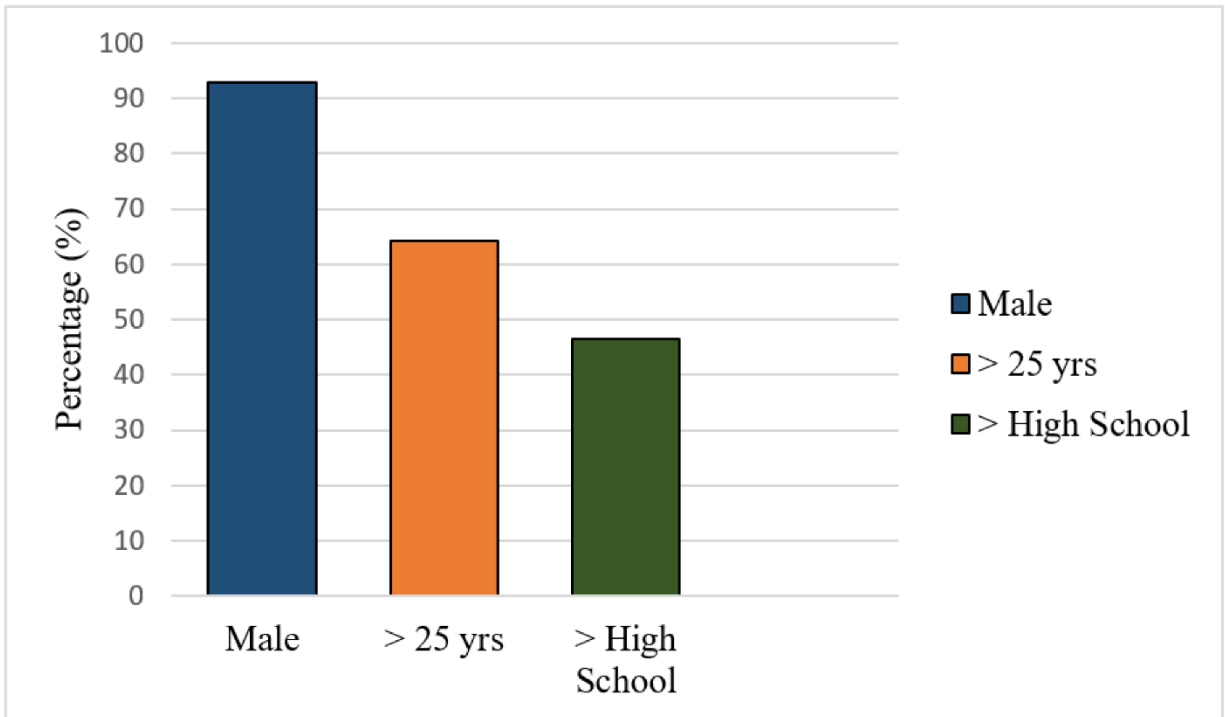


**R21 billion in
tax revenue
lost annually**

**R14 billion in
gold production
lost each year**



**10% of mined
gold smuggled
out of SA annually**



☐ According to one source, Nigeria loses about **₦41.1 billion annually** to illegal mining. [Nigerian Observer](#)

☐ Another estimate places losses (via smuggling + illegal mining) at about **US\$9 billion annually**. [Veriv Africa](#)

☐ The establishment of the “Mining Marshals” (a special enforcement unit) led to **327 arrests** and **98 site recoveries** in one year (2024/25), according to a press release. [Ministry of Information](#)

☐ These figures underscore the financial drain and also the enforcement challenge: although some sites are recovered, the sheer scale of illegal operations means many remain active

Environmental and Social Impacts

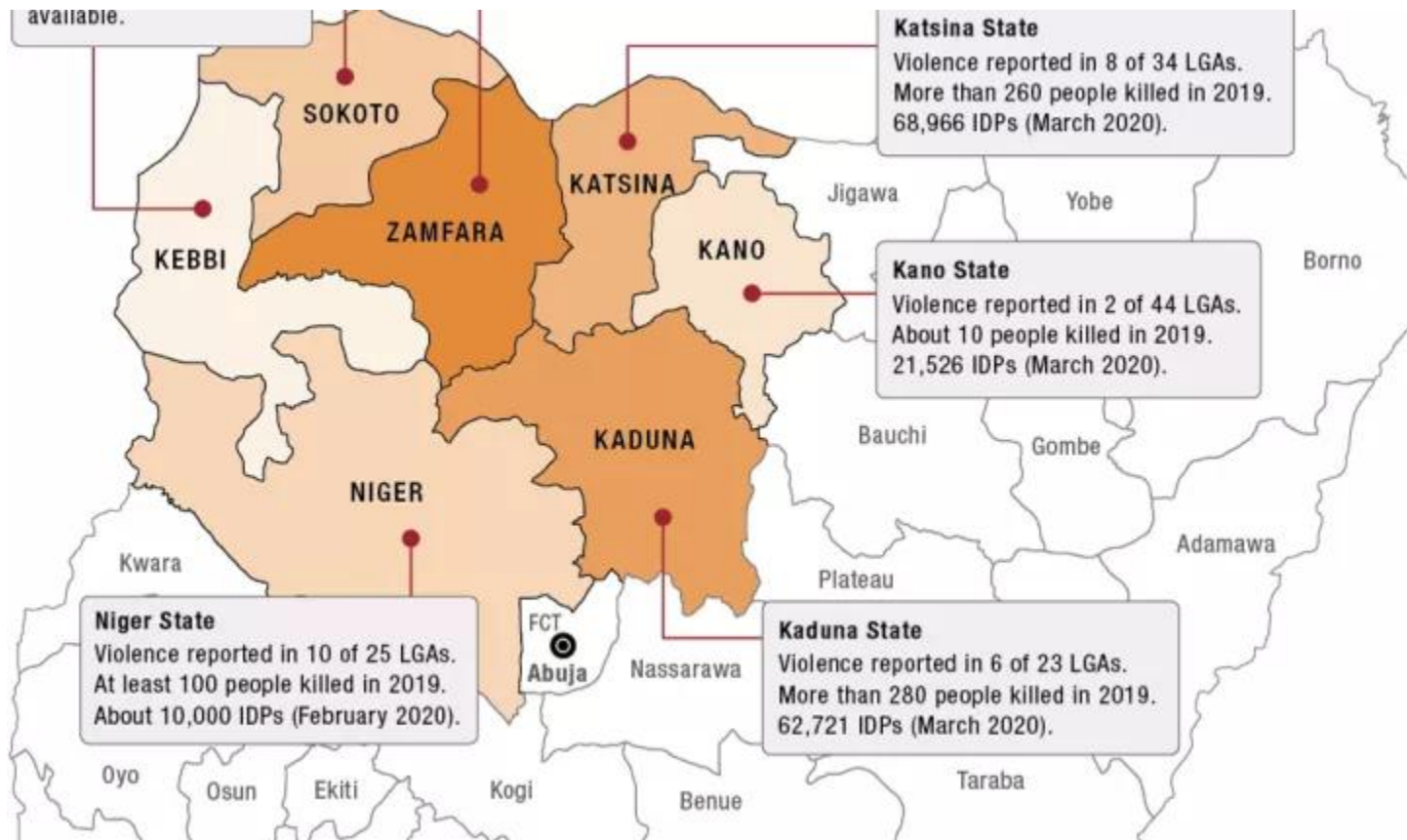






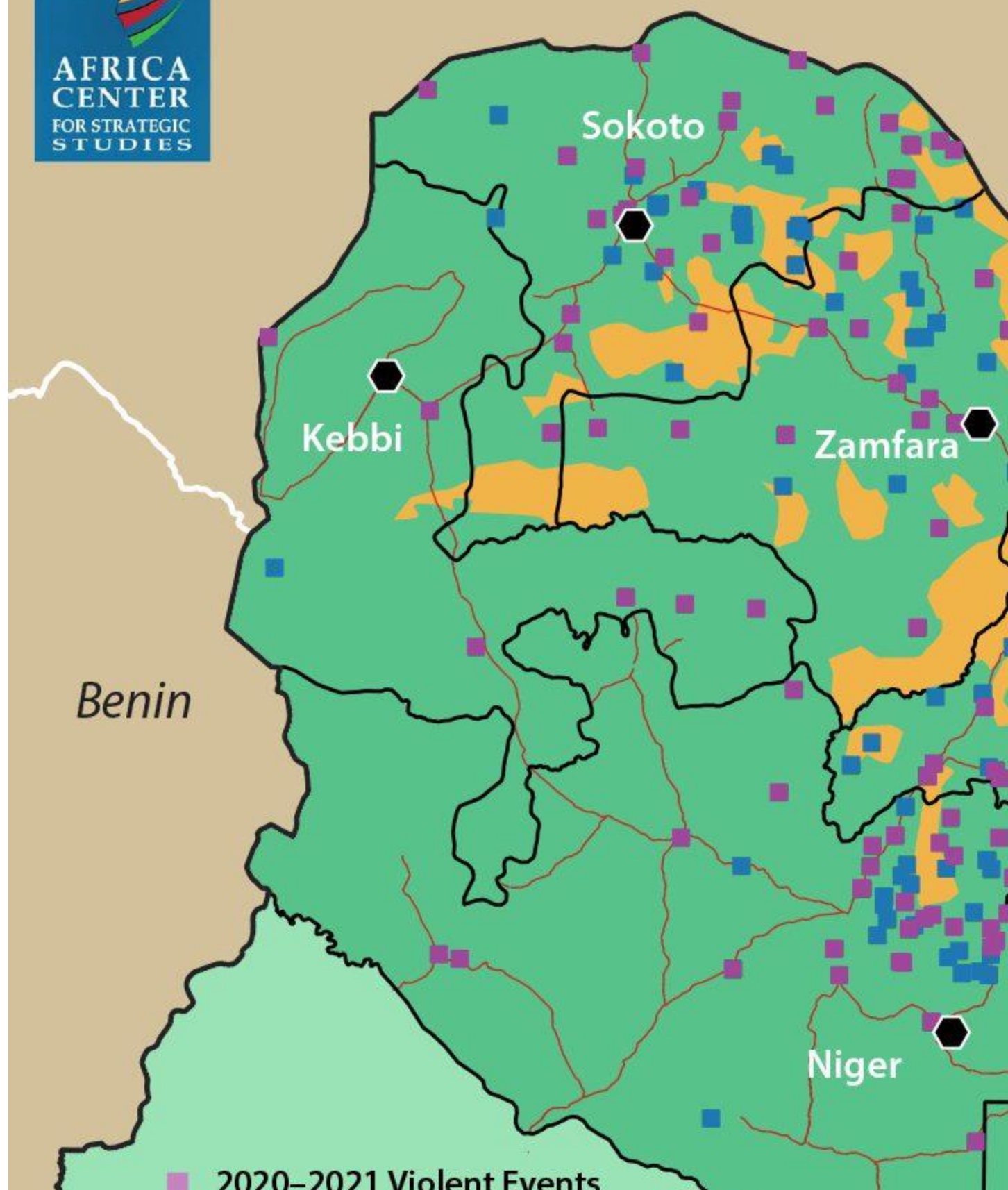
- ☐ Unregulated mining in Nigeria has caused **land/soil degradation**, abandoned pits, contamination of water with heavy metals (lead, mercury), and loss of vegetation
- ☐ In the 2010 lead poisoning crisis in Zamfara, over 400 children died due to exposure to lead dust from gold mining.
- ☐ Child labour and exploitation are serious issues: reports indicate children as young as six working in hazardous mining conditions.
- ☐ These environmental and social harms further exacerbate insecurity: degraded agriculture and water stress lead to livelihood pressures, which in turn may fuel migration, criminality, or conflict.

Illegal Mining and Insecurity: The Nexus





Criminal Violence a





☐ The nexus between illegal mining and insecurity is evident in northern Nigeria. In states with severe banditry and kidnapping (Zamfara, Kaduna, Niger), illegal mining is often an underlying factor.

☐ For instance, illegal miners may pay protection fees to armed groups or use mining sites as safe havens.

☐ The competition over mining sites can trigger violent conflict between local communities, miners, and criminal actors.

❑ In essence, illegal mining undermines state authority in the affected zones, creating ungoverned spaces that facilitate broader insecurity.