DARUBINI

The ASM-LSM Interface in Tanzania's gold sector: Challenges and Opportunities for Coexistence

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Introduction

Tanzania's gold sector is shaped by the dynamic interplay between large-scale mining (LSM) operations and a vast artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) subsector. Over the past decade, and particularly since the 2017 mining-sector reforms, Tanzania has sought to formalize ASM through licensing reforms, designated mining areas, the establishment of mineral markets, financing initiatives, and strengthened regulatory oversight.

At the ASM-LSM interface, frictions inevitably occur. These often occur where industrial concessions overlap with areas historically worked by artisanal miners, or where both compete for access to the same mineral resources. Such overlapping interests frequently generate tensions over land access, mineral rights, security, and environmental compliance. At the same time, the interface also presents opportunities for cooperation, formalization, local economic development, and responsible mineral production.

To unpack this complex dynamic, this edition of Darubini examines the primary drivers of ASM-LSM tensions in Tanzania. It highlights community perspectives on ASM actors' efforts to secure recognition and access and discusses opportunities to strengthen coexistence between ASM and LSM actors.

Understanding the ASM-LSM interface

The Intergovernmental Forum on Mining, Minerals, Metals and Sustainable Development (IGF) and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) similarly highlight that ASM and LSM often operate in neighbouring or overlapping concessions, where tensions over claims can coexist with opportunities for cooperation.

In Tanzania, these interactions are particularly visible where LSM projects operate in areas that have historically supported, or have come to attract, ASM. In some cases, artisanal mining predates large-scale mining operations. In others, ASM activity has expanded around LSM projects as people move into mining areas in search of employment, income opportunities or access to mineralised land. While mining companies hold legally granted mineral rights under the Mining Act, local communities frequently view access to mineralised land as a critical source of livelihood. The resulting tensions therefore cannot be reduced to a simple sequence of displacement, but reflect competing legal, economic, and social interests.

Key drivers of ASM-LSM conflict

Competition over access to mineralized land

Access to mineralized land remains one of the most significant sources of tension between ASM and LSM operators. In some mining areas, particularly in the Lake Victoria Goldfields, artisanal mining has long been part of local livelihood strategies. In others, ASM activity has grown around large-scale projects, as people are drawn by expectations of employment, contracting opportunities or access to mineralised land.

From the ASM perspective, secure access to productive mining areas threatens livelihoods and local economic opportunities. From the LSM perspective, secure access to licensed mineral resources is essential to justify substantial investments in exploration, mine development, infrastructure, environmental compliance, and mine closure obligations.

These tensions are often heightened where communities perceive that licensed areas remain underdeveloped while local demand for mining land continues to increase.

Mine intrusion and security challenges

Unauthorized entry into LSM concessions, whether active, under development or dormant, remains one of the most persistent challenges at the ASM-LSM interface. While often driven by economic survival or the search for high-grade ore, mine intrusions may also reflect deeper tensions between companies and neighbouring communities. These tensions can be linked to lingering grievances over land access, compensation, environmental impacts or past security incidents, particularly where communities feel that their concerns have not been addressed through credible accountability or redress. Broken promises, unmet expectations around local employment and benefits, or unrealistic assumptions about the opportunities created by large-scale mining can further contribute to frustration and distrust.

Intrusions create serious operational, legal, and safety risks for large-scale operators. At the same time, they can place intruders themselves in extreme danger from blasting, heavy machinery, open or unprotected pits, and industrial hazards, too often resulting in severe injuries or fatalities. Responses by public or private security forces engaged to protect mine sites may also pose serious human rights risks, particularly where force is used excessively or without adequate oversight.

The North Mara Gold Mine illustrates the complexity of balancing mine security, community relations, and human rights. Civil society organizations have long documented allegations of excessive force and human rights abuses around the concession. Barrick, the mine's majority owner, has highlighted post-2019 reforms, including strengthened grievance mechanisms and alignment with international security standards.

The North Mara case illustrates that mine intrusion requires more than security enforcement. It also requires attention to the underlying grievances, livelihood pressures and accountability gaps that can drive people onto mine sites in the first place.

Land acquisitions and community concerns

Land acquisition for large-scale mining projects is another important source of tension. Although Tanzanian law provides for compensation and resettlement, affected communities sometimes argue that compensation frameworks do not adequately address livelihood losses linked to ASM, particularly where miners operate without formal titles, contracts or other recognised claims to the land.

A recurring concern among ASM representatives in several mining regions is the limited availability of viable alternative mining areas. Where formalisation does not translate into practical access to mineralised land, ASM communities may continue to see LSM concessions, including dormant or underdeveloped concessions, as the only realistic source of livelihood.

Legal dimensions of the ASM-LSM interface

The governance of mineral resources in Tanzania is guided by the Mining Act [CAP 123 R.E. 2023], which vests control of minerals in the state and regulates the granting of mineral rights. ASM activities are generally conducted under Primary Mining Licenses (PMLs), which are for Tanzanian citizens. Larger operations are conducted under Mining Licenses (MLs) or Special Mining Licenses (SMLs), depending on the scale of investment. These licenses grant holders exclusive rights to develop and mine within licensed areas.

Although these provisions are intended to regulate mineral exploitation and provide legal certainty, they can contribute to conflicts where LSM licences overlap with areas used, claimed or accessed by ASM communities, whether due to long-standing local mining practices or to more recent livelihood pressures in areas affected by population growth and limited employment opportunities around LSM operations.

Sections 120-122 of the Mining Act place limits on how mineral rights may be exercised where mining activities affect owners or lawful occupiers of land, including through requirements for consultation, fair compensation, relocation, and resettlement planning in accordance with land laws.

In practice, however, implementation of these safeguards can be uneven and does not always resolve conflicts at the ASM–LSM interface. A tension remains between formal mineral-rights allocation and the socio-economic realities of ASM livelihoods, especially where legal procedures regulate access or displacement without creating viable alternatives for affected miners.

Opportunities for ASM-LSM Coexistence

Although conflict often dominates discussions of the ASM-LSM interface, several initiatives demonstrate Tanzania's potential for collaboration and shared value creation.

Responsible ASM partnerships

One promising example is the model being developed by Mwamba Mining in Tanzania. Rather than viewing ASM as a security or compliance challenge, Mwamba seeks to connect selected small-scale miners to more formal and responsible mineral supply chains. Its approach combines ore purchasing from vetted operations, technical support, equipment provision, and centralized mercury-free processing. This can help participating miners access formal markets directly, improve recovery rates, while creating entry points for stronger due diligence, traceability, health and safety practices, and environmental management.

Geological data and alternative mining areas

Another opportunity lies in using geological data and more active license management to identify areas that may not meet the economic thresholds required for industrial mining but remain viable for formalized ASM. Recent government efforts to cancel idle exploration licences and reallocate some areas to small-scale miners also point to the potential of unlocking mineralised land that is not being actively developed. Such measures can expand livelihood opportunities for ASM while reducing pressure on LSM concessions.

Lessons from international experience

Ghana offers a useful case study in addressing the ASM-LSM conflict. In the mid-1990s, Abosso Goldfields Limited (AGL), operator of the Damang mine, developed a "Live and Let Live" approach in response to tensions with ASM operators on its lease area. Rather than relying only on enforcement, AGL demarcated areas within its concession where selected local ASM operators could work under agreed rules.

The arrangement was supported by a management committee involving company representatives, ASM representatives, local authorities, traditional leaders and security actors. AGL also issued identification cards, organised education campaigns and seminars, provided technical support, and supplied basic equipment such as water pumps, pans, mercury retorts and improved recovery tools.

The case is often cited as an example of pragmatic ASM–LSM coexistence, showing that structured engagement, designated working areas and technical support can reduce conflict while improving safety and environmental practices. At the same time, it should not be treated as a simple blueprint. The arrangement remained legally and economically fragile, especially where access rights were temporary and where changing gold prices could make previously marginal areas more attractive to the company.

Conclusion

The ASM-LSM interface in Tanzania reflects a broader challenge of balancing investment protection, resource governance, and livelihood security. While both subsectors contribute significantly to national development, persistent tensions over land access, mineral rights, security, and community expectations continue to limit the sector's potential to generate more inclusive and sustainable benefits.

The experience of North Mara highlights the risks associated with unresolved tensions, while emerging partnership models such as Mwamba Mining demonstrate that collaboration can generate mutual benefits. Moving forward, effective management of the ASM-LSM interface will require strengthened ASM formalization, expanded access to designated mining areas, improved consultation and compensation processes, responsible security practices, and collaborative business models. By addressing both the legal rights of licensed operators and the socio-economic realities of ASM communities, Tanzania can transform the ASM-LSM interface from a source of conflict into an opportunity for inclusive and responsible mineral development.

Community voices: ASM's challenges of recognition and access

Effective management of LSM concessions requires attention not only to legal title and operational security, but also to the livelihood dependence and local expectations that shape community relations around mining areas.

Recent events in Patamela village, Saza ward illustrate these concerns. According to a report by Mwananchi Digital, in April 2026 more than 100 artisanal and small-scale miners marched to the Songwe District Council office, accusing village leaders of failing to protect their mining rights. The miners reported losing access to gold pits and being excluded from decision-making processes linked to investor activities in their mining area.

Miners also expressed frustration over the lack of designated mining areas despite their long-standing presence in the region. One miner stated that

> *"This has become a major obstacle for many young people who depend on mining as a source of employment."*

Another added:

> *"Every area we are directed to is owned by an investor. We are asking President Samia Suluhu Hassan to help us get mining areas."*

A recurring concern among small-scale miners is the loss of access to mining areas without clear alternatives. This concern is intensified where mineral rights are perceived to be held speculatively, or where licensed areas remain undeveloped while local demand for mining land continues to grow. More broadly, ASM access is constrained by the limited availability of surveyed and demarcated areas for ASM.

Another source of concern is arrangements in which foreign investors enter ASM areas through technical support agreements but eventually take control of mining sites. Where oversight is weak, such arrangements may allow investors to exploit regulatory gaps, bypass restrictions intended to protect ASM participation, or expand control over mining operations in ways that marginalize local miners.

Testimonies from miners in Mwakitolyo underscore these concerns. "The situation here is dire," one miner noted. Another small-scale miner explained:

> *"With more investors taking over, mining areas are shrinking, and we have nowhere to work. The population keeps growing, but the land available for mining is decreasing."*

These community voices show that ASM–LSM tensions are not only about legal title, but also about livelihoods, expectations and access to viable mining opportunities. Addressing them requires transparent licensing, credible consultation, active licence management and practical pathways for formalised ASM to access mineralised land.

News in Brief

1.Chinese investors' takeover of small-scale mining in Tanzania raises concerns over employment, revenue loss, and the environment
(The Chanzo)

2.Foreign Spark Protests at Busulwangili Mine in Shinyanga Amid Growing Takeover Concerns
(The Chanzo)

3.Small-scale miners cry out against large investors
(TimesMajira)

4.Land conflict troubles gold miners in Songwe (Mwananchi)

5. Reduction of conflicts: Good story for North Mara Gold Mine (Lakez Zone Watch)

6.Geita gold mine to pay compensation to residents for mining activities (IPP Media)

7. Minister Mavunde, I will end the conflict between ASM and LSM (Mzalendo)

8.Advised not to stop the conflicts of small-scale miners and investors (HabariLeo)

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