



Tropentag, September 10-12, 2025, hybrid conference

“Reconcile land system changes  
with planetary health”

## Mining the message: competing narratives of authority in informal mining communities in Ghana

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### Abstract

In many mineral-rich developing countries, informal artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) continues to degrade and contaminate productive agricultural land, posing a growing threat to food security. Although governments have implemented strict crackdowns to curb unlicensed mining, miners frequently gain access to land through informal and often unspoken arrangements. While these practices are technically illegal under formal ASM regulations, they are widely recognised within mining communities and are central to the sector's informality. Existing research identifies a complex set of drivers behind illegal ASM – ranging from global market forces and demographic pressures to economic hardship and weak regulatory frameworks. However, one critical dimension which remains largely overlooked is the role of language in shaping local narratives and decision-making around land use.

This study addresses that gap by applying the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) in combination with Discourse Analysis to examine how actors at the community level frame and negotiate the use of agricultural land for unlicensed mining. Drawing on coded transcripts from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted in six active mining, farming, and forest communities across two regions of Ghana, we analyse the distinct narrative strategies employed by local government officials, chiefs or traditional authorities, and landowners (including farmers). The findings reveal how language serves not only to justify and legitimize certain practices but also to assert authority and marginalise opposing voices. For instance, landowners and chiefs often frame illegal mining as a continuation of traditional land rights, while government officials portray it as criminal and environmentally destructive.

By uncovering these competing narratives and the ideologies they reflect, the study offers new insights into the socio-political dynamics of land use in ASM-affected areas. These findings underscore the importance of narrative and discourse in shaping policy implementation and community responses – key considerations for developing more inclusive and sustainable land use policies in resource-rich developing countries.

**Keywords:** Artisanal and small-scale mining, discourse analysis, Ghana, land use, narratives

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