

‘Strategies of the strong, tactics of the weak’: Exploring the dynamics of resistance against power and its manifestations on artisanal and small-scale mining

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Abstract

Attempts to eliminate unlicensed artisanal and small-scale mining have resulted in an asymmetric conflict between the state and miners. While much literature has explored this tenuous and sometimes conflictual relationship, the dynamics remain under-theorised. Drawing on de Certeau’s articulation of strategies and tactics as our analytical prism, we theorise and categorise the situated actions of, and relationship between, the state and miners, and their potential implications for livelihoods and the extractive economy. Our contribution highlights two distinct temporal frames of engagement that have often culminated in ‘showdowns’ between the state and miners: powerful structures played out in the form of formalisation and military action that re-enact the marginalisation of artisanal mining operators, and miners’ practical subversive responses to the system through ‘bribery’ and ‘hide and mine’. Emphasising the power in miners’ resistance and its domination in localised quotidian worlds, we delineate why the strategies of mining governance regimes, especially in weak institutional contexts, have failed to achieve their intended purpose. Premised on the notion that there are no clear winners in the battle between strategies and tactics, we invite policymakers to temper their romanticised views of current artisanal mining governance strategies, emphasising the strengthening of relational ties with informal-artisanal operators.

Keywords

artisanal and small-scale mining, tactics of the weak, power, resistance, formalisation

Introduction

The artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector continues to be an important economic activity in many parts of mineral-rich spaces (Arthur-Holmes and Abrefa Busia, 2022a; Arthur-Holmes et al., 2023; IGF, 2017), contributing significantly, on the micro and macro

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level, to livelihood improvement and local socio-economic development (Hilson and Garforth, 2013; IGF, 2017; Robbins, 2013; World Bank, 2019). Although highly informal, recent estimates suggest that the sector serves as an engine of employment for millions of people worldwide (World Bank, 2019) and contributes to about 20% of mineral production globally (IGF, 2017).

ASM is broadly defined as labour-intensive mineral extraction activities with limited capital investments using basic tools and manual devices where miners work individually or in small groups, sometimes on a seasonal and subsistence basis (Ferring et al., 2016; Sidorenko et al., 2020). The activities of this category of miners (individuals or groups) are usually ‘poverty-driven’, as they seek to eke out or supplement a subsistence livelihood (Banchirigah, 2008; Hilson and Hu, 2022). However, other studies have accounted for the sector’s economic and technological diversity and for the relationship between ASM and capitalist accumulation. These studies highlight that ASM activities go beyond a somewhat homogenous economic category that is located in ‘positions of survival’; ASM operations have witnessed the utilisation of heavy machinery and the support of commercial business entities (Ofosu and Sarpong, 2022; Sidorenko et al., 2020; Verbrugge, 2014). Those who choose to pursue work in this category are mostly opportunistic entrepreneurs in search of ‘fast money’ and are looking to ‘get rich quick’ (Hilson and Hu, 2022; Verbrugge, 2014). It is important to note the ‘poverty driven’ and the ‘get-rich quick’ categories are the extreme ends; in between, there is a diverse workforce of miners leaning either to the left or to the right, based on the circumstances and opportunities presented. Here we note that the ‘poverty-driven’ category of miners and those closely aligned to this category (those commonly described as ‘informal-artisanal/small-scale miners’ or ‘diggers’ (Libassi, 2022a; Smith, 2021) are chiefly the target of the discourse in this study.

ASM has distributional effects. The wealth ASM generates, opaque and difficult to calculate as it is, affects the majority of the people, especially in the rural economy, and is a crucial element in many other rural businesses (Smith, 2021). In conflict-prone settings, ASM operations are known to keep people from more violent ways of making a living, as the value from ASM flows out to both ordinary people and state figures (Smith, 2021). Despite its positive elements, however, in many areas, the expansion of ASM has generated intense public discussion on sustainable environmental management practices (Clifford, 2022; Marais and Nel, 2016; Ofosu et al., 2020; Siaw et al., 2023). The sector is associated with high environmental costs including poor occupational and health safety records and incidents of water pollution (Arthur-Holmes and Abrefa Busia, 2022b; Bartrem et al., 2022; Siaw et al., 2025; Stemn et al., 2021, 2025). These socio-environmental problems continue to intensify criticisms around ASM operations and, ultimately, ASM’s characterisation as a threat to the environment and to local mining communities (Salo et al., 2016).

In this vein, many governments continue to work out strategies, seeking to ‘sanitise’ the ASM sector. Among others, these strategies involve the formalisation of ASM (Damonte, 2016; Geenen, 2012; Ofosu et al., 2025c), the promotion of ‘revenue-generating’ large-scale mining (LSM) operations (Hilson, 2019; Sauerwein, 2020), and the militarisation or the use of violence in ASM spaces (Bansah et al., 2022, 2025; Ofosu et al., 2024; Spiegel, 2014). For governments, these strategies provide a platform to better govern and consequently manage the social and environmental impacts of ASM (i.e. to minimise its negative impacts and to harness its positive impacts) (Salo et al., 2016). While acknowledging the benefits of these strategies, especially formalisation mechanisms (Siegel and Veiga, 2009), recent studies have called for a critical re-evaluation of these concepts and practices and their contribution to development in ASM

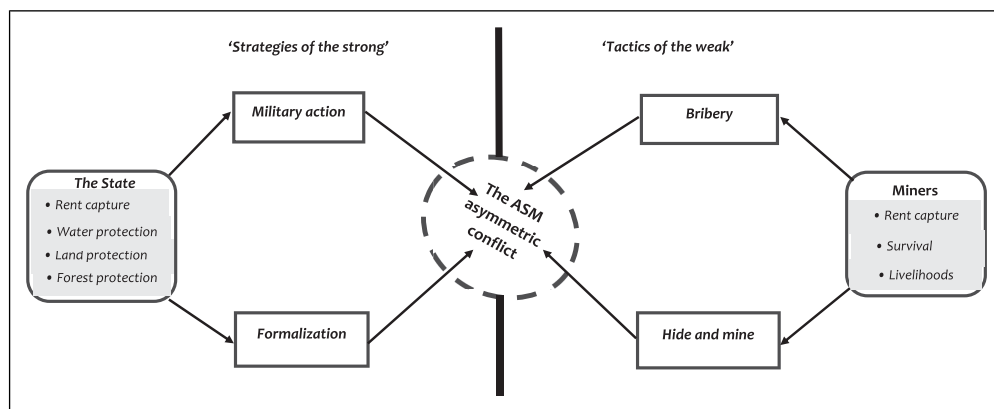


Figure 1. The artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) asymmetric conflict.

(Banchirigah, 2006; Geenen, 2012; Osei et al., 2021), especially the dark side it engenders (Andrews, 2018).

For example, in seeking to implement formalisation processes, the mechanisms often overlook the sustainable livelihoods of indigenous groups and informal-artisanal miners (Andrews, 2018; Arthur-Holmes and Ofosu, 2024; Veiga and Marshall, 2019). In addition, the intense focus on the stimulation of foreign direct investment means that LSM activities continue to gain dominance over pro-poor ASM operations, thus entrenching poverty in ASM settings (Banchirigah, 2006; Hilson, 2017). Drawing insights from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, Geenen (2012) points out that formalisation processes undertaken by the Congolese government have exemplified top-down formalisation policies, compounding the host of ASM-related challenges (Figure 1).

ASM is often repressed in practice (Tschakert, 2009). Thus, contesting their marginalisation and exclusion, informal-artisanal operators continue to devise subversive responses to evade the policies of mining governance regimes. This paper, therefore, seeks to extend our understanding of the motives and behaviours that influence and characterise informal-artisanal miners' initiation and their management of actions in response to

governmental policies. We follow De Certeau's (1984) articulation of 'strategies' and 'tactics' as our analytical points for theorising and categorising the actions of, and relationship between, the state and miners, and their potential implications for rural livelihoods and the extractive economy within which they are embedded.

Further, seeking to add to the existing knowledge on power and resistance as displayed in mining contexts (Adobor, 2023; Conde, 2017), de Certeau's concepts of strategies and tactics help us to know and categorise the nature of oppositional acts that miners engage in as responses to government strategies, which is important to appreciate the limits and/or successes of policy interventions. Specifically, the concepts help encourage a deeper understanding of why key policies such as 'formalisation' and 'militarisation', especially in the context of rural poverty, where there are limited economic alternatives, have failed to achieve their intended purpose (Ofosu et al., 2024; Smith, 2021); they help us to understand that by devising strategies that marginalise and exclude ASM, the operators will always devise tactics to maintain work and counter exclusions. Furniss's (2023) study of women's infrapolitics in ASM in the DRC takes a similar approach. Our work sits in this same vein of encouraging a deeper understanding of the

subtle yet subversive acts of miners and the sometimes tenuous relationship between mining governance regimes (the state) and miners.

By examining these issues, we draw attention to this fact: premised on the overarching ideology that there are no clear winners in the battle between strategies and tactics (De Certeau, 1984; Gladwell, 2013), ‘strategic’ policymakers should seek to meet ‘tactical’ practitioners halfway. This ought to be noted in both scholarly and policy discourses with regard to the artisanal mining sector. ‘Hybrid’ policies that consider the needs of both the state and miners ought to be prioritised. In the case of artisanal mining, these policies should include the enactment of hybrid governance and formalisation processes that integrate informal-artisanal operators into properly managed sustainable structures. This focus highlights a neglected area of policymaking that is vitally important in addressing the big ASM issues of our time.

On strategies and tactics

In ‘The Practice of Everyday Life’ (1984), Michel de Certeau questions how the power structures that characterise what can be referred to as the ‘real world’ can be resisted. The question posed is whether it is possible to resist the ideologies and larger socio-economic forces that discipline individual and collective life. De Certeau explains that the world consists of the ‘strong’ (individuals, institutions, and entities who are powerful in society because they are legally mandated to exercise power and control), and the ‘weak’ (those who have limited power and, thus, are dependent on, or controlled by the strong). Accordingly, the rules and governance systems – strategies – are usually dictated by the ‘strong’; the ‘weak’, however, ensure their own survival by exploiting small opportunities to open up avenues in the territories of the strong, where they can resist or subvert the rules or strategies of the strong (De Certeau, 1984).

This response, with reference to the concepts of de Certeau, can be labelled as ‘tactics of the weak’, that is, creative attempts by the ‘weak’ to resist, subvert, or even exploit the ‘strong’ (De Certeau, 1984; De Certeau et al., 1980). Tactics are ruses or manoeuvres that are frequently clandestine in nature and often fragmented but intentional. According to De Certeau (1984), tactics can serve as a guide for everyday life uncertainties. De Certeau also employs the term ‘tactic’ to underscore the feature of the everyday life practice as ‘an art of the weak’ (De Certeau, 1984: p. 37). Tactics are normally arbitrary, flexible, and hard to determine, and they are often accompanied by mobility. Tactics as ‘an art of the weak’ can be regarded as a form of resistance against differing powers or dominations (Adobor, 2023; Appiah et al., 2021; De Certeau, 1984; Furniss, 2023).

The discussions here also allow for a productive conversation with James Scott’s works on the ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott, 1985) and ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott, 1990). These works show that those in seemingly weak positions can employ other actions to construct resistance against a more powerful entity (Scott, 1985, 1990). Scott (1985) describes what he calls ‘everyday forms of resistance’ by the less powerful who may be resisting the state and some of its policies. The somehow seen but unnoticed everyday actions of dominated groups, such as foot-dragging, squatting, and evasion, what Scott terms ‘infrapolitics’, can sometimes become powerful tools of resistance (Furniss, 2023; Scott, 1990). In other words, those who are weak, often through overt acts of resistance, engage in small acts of defiance, which can cumulatively have significant consequences (Scott, 1985).

Explicating the natural resistance of the poor, Scott distinguishes ‘public transcripts’ from ‘private (hidden) transcripts’ (Scott, 1990). The open or manifest interaction between the less powerful or subordinates and those with dominant power are the ‘public transcripts’, while ‘hidden transcripts’ are the

latent discourses and actions that take place behind the back and beyond the direct observation of those who wield power (Scott, 1990). In other words, hidden transcripts are the concealed actions of the less powerful against the doings of the more powerful so as to garner small or sometimes large victories in unexpected ways (Scott, 1990).

As indicated earlier, the control exercised by large institutions is supported or reinforced by the idea of the real world. The real world is the ideology of the strategies of control. De Certeau seeks to explain how tactics can be deployed to subvert those strategies of control. He does not think we can get rid of them altogether, but he seeks to know if it is possible to foil them in the here and now. In a situation where one person or institution has incredible power, it is not necessarily unjust for those without power to engage in subversive tactics (De Certeau et al., 1980). Something like this idea has long been recognised in more philosophical and scholarly works (Appiah et al., 2021; Arreguin-Toft, 2005; Furniss, 2023; Scott, 1985; Yang and Chen, 2023). In sum, whereas nation states and institutions of control subscribe to strategies in order to gain dominance and control of the real world, the 'ordinary' man, the 'common hero' (De Certeau et al., 1980) continuously seeks to deploy tactics in order to evade the strategies and garner some control in small, unexpected ways. We examine these phenomena in relation to the terrain and context of ASM.

Formalisation as a 'strategy' of the state

As can be gleaned from de Certeau's thesis, governments and large institutions seek to take control of socio-economic life by deploying social and economic forces (strategies) to discipline social life or events. According to Chia and Holt (2009), strategy exhibits a pervasive commitment to the belief that the best approach to adopt in dealing with affairs of

the world is to confront, overcome, and subjugate things to conform to our will, control, and eventual mastery. In ASM contexts, as demonstrated in a number of well-known studies, one of the long-term strategies of state and mining governance regimes, especially in the Global South, centres primarily on the agenda of formalisation aimed at bringing the mainly illegal or informal ASM operations into the formal sector (Geenen, 2012; Hook, 2019; Libassi, 2022a; Martinez et al., 2021; Salo et al., 2016).

The formalisation strategy, it has been argued, could bring ASM operations into the legal system, representing the most appropriate approach of ensuring socio-economic development (Hook, 2019; Siegel and Veiga, 2009). Formalisation of ASM operations entails their legalisation, that is, the observance and adherence to all the provisions and requirements set forth in a mining code (Geenen, 2012; IGF, 2017). The formalisation construct is in sync with the legalist school of thought and the ideas of De Soto (Siegel and Veiga, 2009). In line with these ideas, it has been argued that without formal structures, ASM operators, for example, find it extremely difficult to invest in their operations. Hence, legal titles arising from formalisation mechanisms would help include ASM operators in the formal market economy, incentivising operators to invest long term and access credit from formal financial arenas to fund operations (De Soto, 2002; Siegel and Veiga, 2009). This would help in wealth generation and operational growth on both the micro and macro levels (Geenen, 2012; Ofosu and Sarpong, 2022). In this sense, the socio-economic and environmental development potential of the ASM sector would be maximised (Ofosu et al., 2025c). In effect, economic progress, for example, in ASM contexts, would be realised when there is the legal recognition of ASM operators through licensing procedures (Geenen, 2012; Ofosu et al., 2025a; Siegel and Veiga, 2009).

Further, formalisation, it is argued, would enable the diversification of government

revenue through the broadening of the tax net to include operations outside of formal structures, including ASM (Geenen, 2012). Also, formalisation would help in the implementation of intervention strategies that promote contact with miners, enabling the collection of reliable data to guide project development (Heemskerk, 2005). Additionally, miners, while benefitting from rights and formalisation principles, would also be obliged, under legal recognition, to conform to, for instance, environmental ‘cleanliness’ standards (Ofosu et al., 2025c; Siegel and Veiga, 2009). This creates a win-win situation: the state broadens the tax pool while miners receive the tenure security that enables them to access credit and better technologies to surmount operational challenges (Ribot and Peluso, 2003; Siegel and Veiga, 2009).

The pursuit of formalisation, however, comes with several downsides. Bureaucracy, for example, impedes formalisation processes, sometimes raising the costs associated with the process (Chen, 2012); the facilitation of formalisation processes invariably requires money. Thus, individuals and business entities who cannot afford the monetary cost of joining the formal economy may be excluded (Chen, 2012). This is especially true for ASM, which is largely considered a ‘poverty-driven’ activity (Hilson, 2016; Siwale and Siwale, 2017). Formalisation processes are known to be fraught with administrative inefficiencies. These include lots of paperwork, long waiting periods and travelling distances for securing licences, bribery and extortion etc. (Aryee et al., 2003). These inefficiencies simply make informal/illegal activity more appealing. In sum, informality is largely the result of the high entry barriers that exclude the informal workforce in general, and ASM operators in particular, from the formal economic system (Hilson and Potter, 2003; Siwale and Siwale, 2017).

Some prominent studies have shown that apart from costs, a strict implementation of formalisation mechanisms, while favouring

others, can often disadvantage certain entities and groups (Fisher, 2007; Geenen, 2012; Hook, 2019). Property acquisition and access through formalised systems may prove extremely difficult for some groups and individuals who may lack the wherewithal to overcome formalisation barriers (Hook, 2019). According to Banchirigah (2006), efforts made to bring ASM operators into the legal domain under formalisation mechanisms branded as ‘reforms’ have marginalised already impoverished miners. Along similar lines, Hook (2019) highlights that ‘pre-existing inequality and exclusion have been effectively reinforced or legitimated by the state through the process of formalization’.

On the ‘large-scale mining’ bias as a strategy

As was indicated earlier, for the most part, ASM operations take place in informal spaces (Ofosu et al., 2020; Wagner, 2016). Hence, for most government officials, although ASM can be beneficial to the economy, promoting ASM is tantamount to the promotion of environmental destruction (Clifford, 2022). ASM represents a ‘bad’ situation, which is opposite to the concept of modernisation and efficiency pursued by the larger society (Veiga, 1997). Conversely, the promotion of LSM activities has become the preferred strategy for most governments; LSM activities have become the ‘darling’ industry of many governments (Aubynn, 2009; Hilson, 2019; Sauerwein, 2023).

In this regard, some scholars note that the formalisation mechanisms pursued by mining officials are imbued with what can be termed ‘large-scale mining bias’ (Hilson, 2019; Sauerwein, 2020, 2023). Drawing insights from Ghana, Hilson and Maconachie (2020) observe that governments’ pursuit of formalisation mechanisms is heavily influenced by a bias towards LSM activities. For example, Smith (2021) argues that in the DRC, the

real reason why artisanal mining was closed down in the eastern Congo was also the government's response to the demands of foreign (large-scale) mining companies who were facing opposition from artisanal miners.

Formalisation through militarised means has been an attempt to veil intentions to regain control of the purchasing side of an ASM sector that is greatly populated and influenced by foreigners (Hilson and Maconachie, 2020). Equally importantly, formalisation mechanisms are heavily influenced by attempts to put governments in good positions to allocate parcels of land to multinational mineral exploration and mining companies that then supply the government with significant quantities of steady streams of revenue in the form of, for example, taxes, royalties, and permit fees (Hilson and Maconachie, 2020). In effect, with the knowledge that most ASM operations cannot be traced and taxed, governments, by marginalising ASM, act by promoting LSM to maximise returns from the extractive sector (Hilson, 2019; Hilson and Maconachie, 2020). Also, of relevance for understanding the 'large-scale mining bias' phenomenon is that the imposition of austerity measures on debt-stricken economies by the World Bank and IMF, related to structural adjustments programmes, led to major land sales to foreign mining investors, leaving most local inhabitants displaced (Smith, 2021).

More worrisome, however, as some scholars note, is that the support for the attempt to secure government incomes through the promotion of LSM exacerbates poverty (Banchirigah, 2006). This is partly because in the context of weak institutions, which is the case in many mineral-rich countries, government incomes through natural resource revenues get dissipated and mismanaged, making it difficult to secure socio-economic growth – what is commonly termed the 'resource curse' (Hilson and Maconachie, 2020; Sachs and Warner, 1995).

We conclude this section by reiterating governments' prioritisation of industrial mining when granting mining concessions because

it provides them with cheap access to mineral revenues. However, this does not necessarily mean that concession boundaries and mining sites are free of disputes. There are numerous instances of encroachment on industrial mining concessions by informal ASM miners (see, e.g. Aubynn, 2009). Additionally, the operations of informal miners are known to wreak ecological havoc on the natural environment, with land degradation (Mantey et al., 2016), water pollution, and mercury contamination (Wagner, 2016) being the most common phenomena. In such instances, governments occasionally resort to repressive, violent, and militarised strategies when dealing with informal ASM operators, a phenomenon we examine in the context of the DRC and Ghana in the paragraphs that follow.

Case # 1: The DRC's militarised interventionism

The DRC is blessed with abundant natural resources – coltan (columbite-tantalite), diamonds, gold, copper etc. – which can be harnessed to bring socio-economic development to its citizenry (Hochschild, 1999; Turner, 2007). However, the paradox remains that the country's resource wealth seems to have precipitated socio-economic instability and conflicts (Turner, 2007). This is what many economists and political scientists refer to as 'conflict resource' (Ross, 2004), the 'paradox of plenty' (Karl, 1997), or the 'resource curse' (Auty, 1993; Sachs and Warner, 1995).

Notwithstanding the broader 'conflict resource' framing of the extractive industry in the DRC, however, the ASM industry has continued to serve as a viable avenue of employment for miners and their dependants especially in the eastern parts of the country (Smith, 2021). While the impact of mineral resources on the conflicts in the DRC is open to debate, the way in which mineral wealth has revolutionised the economic livelihoods of the rural poor is something that cannot be denied

(Smith, 2021). This notwithstanding, the dominant narrative has persistently claimed a direct link between the DRC's mineral wealth and protracted violence in the country (Seay, 2012; Smith, 2021). This narrative portrays the DRC as suffering from a resource-conflict 'curse', with greed for mineral-generated wealth driving the conflicts (UNSC, 2019).

However, other explorations challenging the 'conflict mineral' narrative have shed light on other background issues to the DRC-conflict. In this sense, many scholars and analysts, though not completely dismissive of the connection between mineral exploitation and conflict in the DRC, have challenged the prevailing 'conflict mineral' narrative, highlighting that the conflicts relate to other broader internal issues such as the state and government failure on security provisions, poverty, ethnic tensions, and discriminatory national laws (Johnson, 2013; Ndikumana and Emizet, 2003). The works of Autesserre (2012, 2008) and Seay (2012) have gained prominence in this area, contending, among other issues, that there are unsupported assumptions regarding how natural resources are linked to the motivation of combatants and the dynamics of conflict in the DRC (Cuvelier et al., 2014).

However, in line with the conflict mineral narrative, and also in an effort to 'sanitise' the ASM sector, in 2010, the government of the DRC suspended all mineral extraction activities in the Walikale territory and the eastern part of the country (Geenen, 2012; Smith, 2021). On the microeconomic level, the ban had devastating effects. The ban and its associated impact contributed to a significant number of children dropping out of school (Geenen, 2012). The ban also created a generalised deterioration in the economy, economic hardships, and food shortages leading to malnourishment and a spike in diseases (Geenen, 2012). This is consistent with Parker et al.'s (2016) estimation of infant mortality that followed the Dodd-Frank Act, another ASM reform policy in the DRC. Elsewhere, the embargo of Congolese 'conflict minerals' and

the brutal consequences of what people in the DRC mining industry refer to as the 'government's whip' (Smith, 2021: p. 65), exacerbated violence and war in the eastern parts of the country, as young, unemployed men joined militias or simply robbed people in the forests (Smith, 2021).

Case # 2: Ghana's militarised interventionism

The ASM industry continues to be one of the most prominent economic activities in most mineral-rich areas in Ghana (Kudzawu-D'Pherdd et al., 2026; Okoh and Hilson, 2011). Reflecting the traditional positive correlation between labour-intensive sectors and job creation, the sector in Ghana reports high levels of employment contribution especially in rural communities (Arthur-Holmes and Abrefa Busia, 2022a; Arthur-Holmes et al., 2022). The sector is known to offer livelihood opportunities to a large number of people, with estimates showing over one million people as being directly dependent on the sector (Hilson, 2017). Estimates further show that about 30–40% of Ghana's total gold output comes from the sector (Hilson, 2017; Kudzawu-D'Pherdd et al., 2026).

Despite these socio-economic benefits, there is strong evidence to suggest that the sector poses serious threats to the environment (Boadi et al., 2016; Clifford, 2017; Ofosu et al., 2020). In view of this, successive governments have continuously sought strategies to rid the sector of illegalities and the associated environmental challenges. These strategies have included military-led operations aimed at stopping illegal mining operations (Bansah, 2019; Bansah et al., 2025). For example, in 2006, the 'Stop Illegal Mining' or 'Operation Flush-Out' military crackdown was initiated (Eduful et al., 2020; Hilson, 2017). Similarly, in 2013, an Inter-Ministerial Task Force on Illegal Small-Scale Mining was set

up to halt ASM operations across the country (Hilson, 2017; Ofosu et al., 2024).

In 2017, public protests against the environmental degradation caused by the unregulated operations of ASM precipitated the launch of a campaign spearheaded by the popular press (Armah-Atttoh, 2017). The campaign led to calls for action against ASM operations. Emerging discourse on the subject was laced with aggressive rhetoric, often advocating for severe forms of sanctions for ASM actors for committing crimes against the environment (Armah-Atttoh, 2017). In response, the government enacted a total ban on all ASM activities nationwide. No new licences were issued (Eduful et al., 2020; Hilson, 2017; Ofosu et al., 2024). The government marshalled the institutional and military forces to enforce the ban. These forces were empowered to practically enforce the ban on the ground, that is, arrest miners, seize mining equipment, and by so doing, protect the environment (Bansah et al., 2025; Hilson, 2017).

Prominent narratives, especially in the media, depicted the ban as imperative to efforts to minimise or eradicate illegal mining (Sojková, 2022). In the local mining areas, however, the ban was unpopular. This is unsurprising considering the financial stresses and economic hardship the ban engendered (Hilson, 2017; Ofosu et al., 2024). Some women reported they could not even pay energy bills or afford to provide basic necessities such as food (Zolnikov, 2020). Elsewhere the ban limited the socio-economic opportunities for young people, who lost the opportunity to accumulate assets (Osei et al., 2021). Livelihoods directly dependant on the ASM sector – traders, suppliers, and transport operators – also experienced economic hardships due to the ban on mining (Osei et al., 2021; Zolnikov, 2020).

In sum, governmental strategies – formalisation, LSM bias, militarised interventionism – have continuously led to differing forms of marginalisation and dispossession, thus reducing ASM operators'

access to any sustainable means of livelihood. However, spurred by the need for survival, informal miners assert some control and continue to develop creative tactics as a form of resistance to subvert the control exercised by the strategies of the real mining world. The next paragraphs begin to delineate these themes.

Unpacking the tactics of the weak

Greasing palms as 'tactics'

As indicated earlier, one of the strategies of the state with regard to mining governance has been formalisation. However, a prevailing characteristic of formalisation iterations is the marginalisation of artisanal miners, who expected to benefit from the supposed formalisation 'development' promises (Fisher, 2007). In contrast, formalisation strategies, as noted earlier, seem to disadvantage such miners (Andrews, 2018). Although formalisation has, in some cases, facilitated cleaner production mechanisms (Martinez et al., 2021; Ofosu and Sarpong, 2023), the existing evidence suggests that exclusion and marginalisation are inherently created under the umbrella of formalisation (Banchirigah, 2006; Hilson and Potter, 2003).

The formalisation phenomena exclude most miners from land acquisition arrangements (Malone et al., 2023). The allocation of lands to large-scale miners deprives people of mineralised lands that, in most cases, serve as their only means of survival. Even in cases where special arrangements are sometimes made for unused portions of an awarded concession – unsuitable for large-scale projects – to be made available for small-scale mining activities, the management of the LSM usually elect to withhold such lands (Banchirigah, 2006). Although the artisanal mining operators are often the customary landowners and the ones who discovered the deposits and started working them first, they are usually deemed to be invaders of the land, 'disposable illegals', as they might not possess the mineral titles and the

necessary permits to operate (Luning, 2014). Informality, therefore, is frequently seen as an upshot of the neglect of informal artisanal mining operators from existing resource governance frameworks (Verbrugge and Geenen, 2020).

In these repressive contexts, from a de Certeauian perspective, the ‘ordinary’, the ‘common hero’ (De Certeau et al., 1980) miner has found ways to exist in the ‘strongholds of the contemporary “mining” economy’ (De Certeau et al., 1980). Miners have devised ways to strike some blows within the domain of the established, often repressive mining strategic order (Adobor, 2023; De Certeau et al., 1980) by adopting tactics as a key part of everyday informal mining life. Prime among the tactics is ‘bribery’. Miners, recognising inefficiencies in the mining governance system (Chipangura, 2019; Crawford and Botchwey, 2017), for example, have found ways to exploit inefficiencies in the governance system; hence, miners have resorted to bribery as a way of subverting government strategies.

This bribery phenomenon has been noted by numerous scholars. According to Geenen (2012), at the height of the mining ban in the DRC, miners paid bribes to the security officers and policemen, enabling them to continue with their operations. One miner commented: ‘It’s a matter of agreement. We give them something, and they let us work’.

Geenen (2012) states that miners paid bribes to different authorities. In exchange, they obtained access to mineral-rich shafts. According to Smith (2021, p. 137), miners used minerals as bribes to ‘make friends’ with state officials in the police department, for example, who would inform them when other state officials were coming to harass them. Miners, employing bribery as a tactic, were sometimes even able to turn police or soldiers against corporations and high-level state figures. As a result, miners viewed minerals as being alternate and parallel to

the official power of the social order and described how minerals enabled them to ‘make law’. Also in the DRC, Furniss (2023) explains that bribery was an important tactic employed by female mine workers, as it enabled them to obtain permission to mine illegally. Furniss (2023, p. 1466) further highlights that in the instances of bribery, the authorities turned a blind eye to the presence of women (mostly with babies) in the mines, with the women describing the bribe as a means to ‘sell their minerals but also to avoid problems’. Although the bribery tactic was not a blanket safety measure due to security lapses at the mines, Furniss (2023, p. 1466) states: ‘The tactic of bribery still evidences women’s skills in navigating the complexity of illegal mining in order to maintain work and protect themselves’.

Similar cases of acts of ‘greasing the palm’ of state officials have been observed in Zimbabwe (Chipangura, 2019) and Ghana (Bansah, 2019). When the ban on ASM was in force in Ghana, a miner in the study by Bansah (2019) noted the following in an interview:

We are often pursued by government security forces. We run and leave our equipment behind. They destroy the equipment and sometimes get to arrest our colleagues who could not escape. They sometimes demand money from the people they arrest. If you can’t pay, they take you to the police station and to the law court. A month ago, we had to contribute money to get one of our guys released by the security forces. One ‘big man’ later advised us to ‘find’ money for the security forces so that they stop disturbing us. We started contributing money for them through one other ‘big man’. Now, they hint us when they are coming for operations so that we don’t go to site on that particular day. Sometimes too they give us stickers to tag our equipment, and they don’t do anything to that equipment. That’s how we have managed our activities so far. (Bansah, 2019: p. 6)

From Colombia, [Jonkman \(2022, p. 301\)](#) brings to light such acts of bribery in the conversation below:

Question: Do the police know that people are mining here?

Answer: Of course... We pay them so we can move our fuel and machines.

‘Hide and mine’ – The ‘cat’ and ‘mouse’ game

ASM usually takes place in the hinterlands and peripheral regions, where the presence of state institutions is limited ([Jonkman, 2022](#); [Verbrugge, 2015](#)). Hence, one of the tactics employed by informal miners to keep state officials and extractive companies at bay is what could be termed the ‘hide and mine’ mechanism or the ‘cat and mouse’ phenomenon, with the latter providing a useful simile for describing the dynamic between state officials and miners and for understanding miners’ tactics. Like a cat and mouse existing in the same enclosed space, state officials and miners, though operating in the same ‘surface’ and ‘subsurface’ mining space, have different views and experiences of the spaces ([Jonkman, 2022](#); [Libassi, 2022a](#)). Referencing [Jonkman \(2022\)](#), the ‘mouse’ tactic used by miners seems to be aided largely by the physical environment in which the miners operate.

According to [Jonkman \(2022\)](#), the physical world of informal ASM operators, that is, the technology, topography, and geology, mediates their relationship with state officials. What could be described as ‘natural’ and ‘undercover’ infrastructures, that is, tunnels, excavators, dredgers, mountains, and forests, help ASM operations to hide from state agents, showing the other possible important aspects and defiant utility of these undercover infrastructures ([Libassi, 2022b](#)). [Libassi \(2022b\)](#) explicates how, in Indonesia, miners find ways to escape state-corporate defences by following

rocky, forested pathways and muddy streambeds to move secretly on and off mining concessions. In this sense, miners employ the clandestine infrastructure to play ‘cat and mouse’ with the state authorities. [Libassi \(2022b\)](#) highlights that much as the ‘cat’ (the state-corporate) would want to expel or oust the ‘mice’ (the miners), miners find clever or ingenious ways to escape, sometimes employing the ‘specific qualities’ of the underground to their advantage. In doing so, they bypass state authority and enact their own territorial claims to the mineral-rich underground spaces ([Libassi, 2022b](#)). In effect, miners, cherishing their invisibility, usually operate in remote and liminal areas out of reach of state officials ([Libassi, 2022b](#)).

[Smith \(2021\)](#) highlights that invisibility, to miners, is wealth, since it is their invisibility that makes it possible for them to actively mine their source of livelihood (minerals) while simultaneously evading the state apparatus; in contrast, visibility makes it possible for the mineral wealth of the miners to be expropriated. Invisibility and movement, therefore, combine in a system allowing miners to secure sustenance. This phenomenon has been widely reported elsewhere in most mineral-rich areas and especially in the Amazon ([McCoy and Traiano, 2021](#); [Watts, 2023](#)). Elsewhere, according to [Geenen \(2012\)](#), during the ban in the DRC, most rebel groups stayed in the hinterlands they already had under their control and continued mining. In Zimbabwe, reports and studies indicate that mining, during the ban, continued in a semi-clandestine way ([Spiegel, 2014](#)). Some of the miners used very labour-intensive hand milling equipment at night to evade the police, and the miners also moved into very isolated areas ([Spiegel, 2014](#)). In Ghana, mining operators turned ASM into a nocturnal (night) activity in most mining areas during the nationwide ban on ASM ([Bansah, 2019](#)).

Up to this point, our discussion reads as a story of an antagonistic relationship between

the state and miners. However, in the context of weak institutional developments, there have been reported instances of less contentious politics leading to the merging of ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’, that is, the ‘hybridisation’ phenomenon. It is to this discussion that we now turn.

‘Hybridisation’ – Where strategies and tactics merge

Despite the persistent vilification of miners, there is evidence that in weak institutional contexts, miners help structure the state’s institutional architecture and its existence (Smith, 2021). In some instances, state regulation would not exist without miners (Damonte, 2021; Smith, 2021). In contexts where the state has been unable to establish its territorial presence, for example, artisanal mining moves beyond a form of extraction to become a form of collaboration among different actors, that is, state actors and miners (Smith, 2021). Evidence from Peru (Damonte, 2018), the DRC (Smith, 2021), and Colombia (Jonkman, 2022) highlights miners’ engagement in dynamic, bottom-up practices of governance and state-making aimed at incorporating and collaborating with other state beings. From the Philippines, Verbrugge (2015) brings evidence to show that informal small-scale gold mining, instead of undermining state power, actually consolidates state rule at least at the local level. The bottom-up engagement with the state helps build local forms of order and authority, localising processes of state consolidation. This contrasts with the top-down strategy on the part of the state seeking to extend its fiscal-regulatory control over the illegal mining areas (Verbrugge, 2015b).

Although miners work and live under subsistence conditions, their institutional and political influence can sometimes be substantial (Klein, 2022). Indeed, miners can sometimes be the most influential sources of governance and movement in their communities, responsible for reconstructing places and regenerating

people usually affected by conflict (Smith, 2021). In weak institutional contexts, miners are not simply passive subjects. Instead, they become primary stakeholders in the formulation of societal regulations (Furniss, 2023); the regulatory system becomes extremely dynamic, and much of the dynamism emerges from miners as active partakers, exercising agency and the power to co-opt state officials into their work and collaborating with them (Damonte, 2018, 2021; Smith, 2021). As miners collaborate with state actors, they engage in possible the formation of state regulation. By acting forcefully upon state governance, they influence how the state and formal law shape and influence their work and everyday life (Jonkman, 2022).

Elsewhere, similar accounts of miners’ agency in state governance are provided. In Peru, Damonte (2018) highlights that through political agency and the reproduction of ‘hybrid’ formal and informal institutions, ASM operators have learnt to contest, reinterpret, and build alternatives to central state governance. Regarding the formalisation process, for example, miners bring their agency to bear on the process through opposition and sometimes negotiation, ultimately influencing the process (Damonte, 2021). The fact that miners’ agency has been accepted by state institutions represents an advance in the miners’ quest to establish some power. This has paved the way for hybrid governance, that is, formal state institutions and informal miners’ regulations of ASM, ensuring order even in the absence of state control. Weakly coupled mining agents manage to establish governance schemes by institutionalising their practices as hybrid entanglements (Damonte, 2018, 2021). In doing so, they do not oppose state rule but contest central government’s capacity to govern their activities by strategically adopting, negotiating, or avoiding state formalisation rules and procedures (Damonte, 2021).

What these dynamics, explored in this section under ‘hybridisation’, point to is that it is possible for the state – sometimes as the

dominant/weak power – to negotiate with miners, with sometimes weak/dominant agency, to institute regulations and policies to regulate miners' work and the mining governance. The state and miners can live and work together, giving rise to opportunities to improve governance around the extractive sector. Negotiating, working together, and building hybrid structures, the state and miners can, for example, decide on what is 'best' formalisation and how best can formalisation be instituted. At this juncture, we can conclude by taking all the different bits about 'mining', 'strategies', and 'tactics' presented in this work and fleshing out the central ideas that emerge in all of them.

Discussion and conclusion

The ways in which miners and local people subvert and resist strategies in relation to governance in extractive industries continue to receive traction in scholarly domains (Adobor, 2023; Damonte, 2018); the deployment of tactics as a form of everyday resistance by miners against the policies of mining governance regimes continues to gain the attention of scholars and policymakers (Adobor, 2023; Furniss, 2023). In this contribution, therefore, we have sought to extend the existing knowledge in these domains by examining Michel de Certeau's concepts of strategies and tactics to theorise and categorise the actions of, and relationship between, the state and miners. Further, by engaging with the concepts of strategies and tactics, we seek to highlight and encourage a deeper understanding of why key government policies such as 'formalisation' and 'militarisation' have failed to achieve their intended purpose, and the potential implications for rural livelihoods and the extractive economy within which they are embedded. Hence, by extension, we offer a critique of mainstream government and of development policy that favours LSM and enforcement of the law – whether through formalisation or military intervention. In practice, these policies

fail by destroying opportunities for income from ASM.

In so many ways, the existing governance strategies for the extractive sector have led to forms of dispossession and marginalisation, thereby reducing ASM populations' access to sustainable livelihoods (Andrews, 2018; Fisher, 2007). Continuing formalisation processes, with the associated high fees and bureaucracy, overburden miners and exclude them from formal mining regimes (Geenen, 2012; Tschakert, 2009). While the promotion of LSM is usually perceived by mining authorities to be a necessity for wealth accumulation, the phenomenon in fact hinders 'development' in many mineral-rich communities (Banchirigah, 2006; Siegel and Veiga, 2009). Consequently, in sub-Saharan African contexts, many locals and peasant farmers in mining communities have lost their prime source of livelihood due to land dispossession and are left instead to live with the negative impacts of the mining industry (Andrews, 2018; Geenen, 2012).

Militarisation strategies also continue to receive an enormous backlash in academic discussions. For example, there are several reports of militarised efforts to end the growing environmental destruction of the Amazon rainforest (Damonte, 2021; McCoy and Traiano, 2021) and many other mining areas (Eduful et al., 2020). Broader scholarship, however, unequivocally reminds us that militarisation is not the answer in seeking to curb the environmental excesses of informal mining (Eduful et al., 2020; Geenen, 2012; Hilson, 2017). On the contrary, military interventions have provoked miners to adopt new tactics and put up a fight against state control (Damonte, 2021).

Today, most formalisation and militarisation policies have failed because they seem to misunderstand or neglect to consider the needs of miners (Chipangura, 2019; Hilson, 2017). The evidence is reliable, as many countries that have used these approaches continue to witness increases in the very

operations the crackdowns sought to halt (Damonte, 2016; Geenen, 2012). Indicative of the ‘much power in resistance’ phenomenon (Ortner, 1995) and ‘domination in localised everyday lifeworlds’ dynamics, miners, even in the face of threats of arrest and prosecution, continue to engage in informal/illegal ASM to safeguard their means of obtaining a sustainable livelihood. Military crackdowns on operations have not deterred operators. Instead, the poverty-driven nature of the activities continues to influence a poverty-driven resistance (Ofosu et al., 2024). The answer, therefore, seems to lie in finding workable, hybrid strategies for ASM.

Premised on the overarching observation that there are no clear winners in the battle between strategies and tactics, strategic policymakers should seek to meet tactical practitioners halfway. As succinctly put by Smith (2021), most conflicts emerge from the situation of being excluded and the effects that result from it. In this sense, ‘peace comes from collaborative inclusion’ (Smith, 2021: p. 104). This ought to be noted in both scholarly and policy discourses with regard to the ASM/extractive sector.

More crucially, this essay argues that the use of tactics such as, for example, ‘bribery’ and ‘hide and mine’ should be seen as enabling mechanisms assisting ASM operators to resist structural domination. Due to governmental and formalisation shortcomings, miners’ tactics should not be seen as deviance (Adobor, 2023). Nor should such tactics be seen as a necessarily criminal or deviant behaviour; instead, they should be viewed from the point of contestation over ownership and resource-sharing in the extractive sector. In fact, miners’ tactics should be viewed as necessary responses to an ASM governance system that deepens the exclusion of ordinary miners and threatens their means of livelihood (Adobor, 2023). Tactics have become an everyday means for the miner to subsist and to challenge the domineering strategies of mining governance

regimes in the struggle for recognition (Adobor, 2023).

Tactics seem to emerge out of necessity (Adobor, 2023; De Certeau, 1984; Furniss, 2023). Tactics also appear as the means by which miners manifest their interests (Furniss, 2023). Therefore, any attempts to ignore the tactics of miners would be tantamount to ignoring the things that are necessary and of interest to miners. In this vein, ‘hybrid’ policies and bottom-up practices of governance that consider the needs of both miners and the state alike ought to be prioritised. Mining governance regimes should understand the dynamic processes of institutional hybridisation and make efforts to enhance governance by engaging with miners. In this regard, one of the relevant questions appears to be the following: How could the ‘strategists’, that is, the powerful (i.e., mining governance regimes) know and address the issues that are necessary for miners? Seeking to answer this question leads us to pose further questions. For example, if licensing fees are high, serving as a hindrance for miners to register their operations, would it not be appropriate for licensing regimes to consult and work with miners in determining fees that may be affordable? If licensing procedures are bureaucratically inefficient, would it not be appropriate for miners to have a say in what constitutes proper licensing procedures? If the promotion of LSM activities continues to harm ASM operators, pushing them to mining peripheries, would it not be appropriate to ensure artisanal miners have secure access to mineral deposits they can viably extract as a way of opening up employment opportunities. Would it not be possible to allow ASM operators to partner with LSM, allowing them to work on concessions amenable for small-scale mining? (Ofosu and Arthur-Holmes, 2025; Ofosu et al., 2025b). We do not claim to have the answers to these questions. However, finding answers to them could be vitally important in addressing some of the big ASM issues of our time.

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