

ARTISANAL MINING AND BANDITRY ACTIVITIES IN TARABA STATE, NIGERIA, 2015-2024

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Abstract

This study examines the nexus between artisanal mining and the rise of banditry in Taraba State, Nigeria, from 2015 to 2024. The objectives of the study were to examine the nature, and drivers of artisanal mining activities in Taraba State between 2015 and 2024 and assess how weak or ineffective regulation of artisanal mining has contributed to the rise of banditry and insecurity in Taraba State. Qualitative method was employed across six mining-prone Local Government Areas. The study is anchored on State Fragility Theory. The study revealed nature and character of artisanal mining activities to include poverty, unemployment, and agricultural decline, which push communities into informal mineral extraction for survival. The findings also revealed that weak regulatory enforcement stemming from institutional incapacity, logistical constraints, and systemic corruption has created a governance vacuum in mineral-rich zones. This vacuum allows artisanal mining sites to become hotspots for criminal exploitation, financing armed groups and fueling violent competition over resources. The study documents how banditry, kidnapping, and arms smuggling have proliferated as a direct consequence of this ungoverned, lucrative informal economy. Despite state interventions, including Executive Order No. 5 (2023) and security task forces, effectiveness remains limited by internal sabotage, poor funding, and inadequate equipment. The research concludes that the link between artisanal mining and insecurity in Taraba is a symptom of broader state fragility, where governance failures permit illicit economies to thrive, eroding state authority and community safety. To address this, the study recommends an integrated policy response combining strengthened, coordinated regulatory and security mechanisms with sustainable livelihood alternatives to provide economic resilience and reduce dependency on illegal mining.

Keywords: Artisanal Mining; Banditry; State Regulation; Internal Security; Taraba State

Introduction

Banditry in Nigeria has evolved into a complex and multifaceted security challenge that fundamentally undermines national stability, rural livelihoods, and human security. Characterized by armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, cattle rustling, and coordinated rural raids, this phenomenon has seen a marked geographical expansion, extending from its northwestern epicenter into the North Central region, including Taraba State (Anyadike, 2023; Ojewale, 2023). In Taraba, often celebrated as “Nature’s Gift to the Nation” for its rich biodiversity and mineral wealth, the period from 2015 to 2024 has witnessed a disturbing escalation in bandit violence. Local Government Areas such as Bali, Gassol, Wukari, and Takum have transformed into recurrent theatres of violent criminality, marked by mass killings,

abductions, and widespread internal displacement (Global Terrorism Index, 2023; Nigeria Security Tracker, 2022). The devastating socio-economic consequences are profound: the disruption of agrarian economies, severe food insecurity, the collapse of local governance, and a pervasive climate of fear have crippled community resilience (Osasona, 2021; Ejiofor, 2022).

While historical analyses of instability in Taraba have rightly focused on ethno-religious tensions and farmer-herder conflicts (Lenshie, 2018; Okoli, 2019), the contemporary character and persistence of banditry demand an examination of its evolving political economy. Emerging scholarship posits a critical, yet underexplored, nexus between this violent criminality and the state's illicit resource sector (Ojo et al., 2023; Dennis et al., 2022). Taraba's abundant deposits of gold, baryte, and gemstones have triggered a rapid, largely unregulated expansion of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) across remote territories. This mining boom has not only caused significant environmental degradation and public health crises, as evidenced by heavy metal contamination in communities like Didango (Garba et al., 2024), but has also created new, lucrative economies outside state control. Critically, these ungoverned spaces and illicit financial flows appear to be directly fueling the banditry crisis. Evidence suggests that mining sites serve as strategic hubs where bandit groups extract "taxes," launder proceeds, and barter minerals for small arms and light weapons, thereby enhancing their operational capacity, logistical networks, and resilience against state security forces (Hunter, 2022; Onuoha & Ojewale, 2023).

This dynamic points to a significant transformation in the nature of banditry in Taraba from sporadic criminal predation to a more entrenched, financially motivated insurgency against rural order. Despite federal legal frameworks like the Minerals and Mining Act and state-level interventions such as Executive Order No. 5 (2023), which banned illicit mining, banditry has proven persistent and adaptive. This persistence underscores a profound governance deficit, where the state's inability to regulate the mineral economy or secure its borders has inadvertently monetized insecurity (Oruonye et al., 2023; Mom, 2023). Consequently, understanding the drivers, financing, and sustainability of contemporary banditry in Taraba necessitates a primary focus on banditry itself as the critical dependent variable, while scrutinizing the unregulated artisanal mining sector as a pivotal, enabling condition. This study therefore investigates the nature and evolution of banditry in Taraba State from 2015 to 2024, with the central aim of analyzing how the governance failures surrounding artisanal mining have contributed to the escalation, financing, and intractability of this pervasive security threat.

Literature review and theoretical Framework

Conceptual Review

Artisanal Mining

Artisanal Mining: A low-technology, labor-intensive, and often informal mineral extraction process, typically undertaken by individuals or small groups with minimal capital investment and rudimentary

tools. It is a complex socio-economic phenomenon driven by poverty and weak regulation, which simultaneously sustains livelihoods and fuels insecurity in resource-rich but poorly governed regions. The concept of Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining (ASM) is multifaceted, with definitions varying across institutions and scholarly perspectives. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 1999) frames it primarily as a labor phenomenon, emphasizing its role as a source of employment for marginalized populations. In contrast, the World Bank (2020) adopts a development-oriented view, seeing ASM as a potential driver of inclusive growth if properly formalized and regulated. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2018), however, highlights its environmental dimension, focusing on the associated degradation and contamination, such as from mercury use.

Scholarly perspectives further enrich the concept. From a political economy viewpoint, scholars like Hilson (2002) define artisanal mining as a critical rural livelihood system and a coping mechanism for poverty and state failure. Others, such as Bryceson and Geenen (2016), conceptualize it as a "frontier economy" that operates in zones of limited state authority. In the specific context of Nigeria, the concept takes on a security dimension. Ogbonnaya (2020) and Onuoha and Ojewale (2023) define artisanal mining as an informal activity that, in the absence of effective regulation, fuels insecurity by funding violent groups and creating a nexus with banditry and criminal networks.

Synthesizing these views, artisanal mining is understood in this study not merely as an economic activity, but as a governance and security challenge. Its informality and illegality in regions like Taraba State are symptomatic of regulatory failure and directly contribute to the complex security landscape, linking mineral resource exploitation directly to banditry and national security threats.

Banditry

The phenomenon of armed banditry has been understood and explained from a variety of standpoints. According to Okoli and Ugwu (2019), banditry refers to the actual or threatened use of arms (any instrument of force/coercion/violence) to dispossess people of their material belongings. Ladan (2015) on the other hand averred that, banditry is, more often than not, a gang phenomenon, although some bandits have been known to operate as lone brigands not associated with any criminal networks.

Banditry means occurrence or prevalence of armed robbery or violent crime. It involves the use of force, or threat to that effect, to intimidate a person with the intent to rob rape or kill. More importantly, it thrives within the 'social ecology' of the rural sector characterized by gross governance deficits (Olaniyan & Yahaya, 2016). Banditry leads to disruption of life as we know it. The desire to avoid strife and its attendant consequences leads to displacement and loss of lives and properties. Armed banditry also leads to the existence of constant fear of attacks, which take away human dignity and people's ability to organize, seek and engage in livelihoods (Olaniyan, 2014).

Tahir and Bernard (2022) posits that banditry can be classified based on the underlying 'intent' or 'motive'. In this regard, one can talk of 'social banditry' that is generally motivated by the intent to protest

social inequality and to redistribute wealth within a locality. Likewise, one could talk of other forms of banditry that are principally motivated by ‘political’ or ‘economic’ reasons. When ‘location’ of occurrence is the underlying index, one can speak in terms of ‘rural vs. urban banditry’ or ‘frontier vs. countryside banditry’, as the case may be. Similarly, Tahir and Bernard (2022) averred that banditry can be ‘mercenary’ or ‘autonomous’ depending on how the actor of ‘agency’ is played out. Mercenary banditry is perpetuated by auxiliaries or mercenaries working for a principal in a sort of principal-agent relationship, while autonomous bandits are self-motivated and personally commissioned. ‘Organized banditry’ thrives on a network of actors that are syndicated and coordinated while petty banditry is perpetrated by individual or group actors that are not so organized. ‘Roving bandits’ are more or less mobile or itinerant while stationary bandits are settled or sedentary. Lastly, ‘maritime banditry’ refers to offshore robbery (piracy) as compared to those that occur on the coast or mainland (Tahir & Bernard, 2022).

Artisanal Mining, Banditry and Security Challenges in Nigeria: The Nexus

Artisanal mining and banditry in Nigeria are deeply intertwined phenomena that produce complex security challenges across mineral-rich regions, particularly in the North-West and parts of the North-Central zone. Artisanal mining often informal, unregulated, and driven by poverty and weak governance creates lucrative opportunities that attract criminal networks, fuel local competition for resources, and provide financing and safe havens for armed actors (Adewale, 2020; Nwafor, 2022). Consequently, what might appear as isolated economic activity frequently evolves into a security problem with implications for community cohesion, state authority, and regional stability.

A central dynamic in the nexus is the economics of illegal mineral extraction. Artisanal mining generates quick revenue streams through gold and other high-value minerals, creating incentives for non-state actors to seize, control or tax mining sites. Bandit groups and criminal entrepreneurs exploit these opportunities by extorting miners, controlling transport routes, and coordinating smuggling networks that move ore across borders (Ogundele, 2023; Ogbonnaya, 2020a). The illicit proceeds finance arms purchases, pay fighters, and sustain patronage networks that shield criminal enterprises from law enforcement, thereby reinforcing cycles of violence and impunity (Usman, 2023).

Equally important is the territorial and governance vacuum that artisanal mining often exposes. Mining sites are frequently located in remote, poorly policed rural areas where the state’s presence is minimal. Weak institutional capacity manifested in inadequate monitoring, lack of local administration, and corruption among officials permits armed groups to entrench themselves as parallel authorities, administering protection, adjudicating disputes, and extracting rents from mining economies (Yakubu, 2022; Oruonye et al., 2023). This substitution of governance functions by violent non-state actors undermines state legitimacy and complicates conventional counterinsurgency or policing responses.

The nexus also exacerbates communal and inter-group tensions. Competition over access to mining claims has provoked local conflicts between indigenous communities and migrant miners, sometimes

aligning with pre-existing ethnic or farmer-herder divides. These localized clashes can escalate when armed groups intervene to protect economic interests or when political actors instrumentalize disputes for electoral gain (Onyeukwu, 2022; Audu, 2023). Such dynamics make conflict resolution more difficult because grievances are economic, social, and political all at once.

The security response to this nexus has tended to oscillate between militarized suppression and ad-hoc local enforcement. Military operations and security taskforces have disrupted some networks and reclaimed territory temporarily; however, scholars warn that purely coercive strategies often produce short-term gains followed by renewed illicit activity once pressure eases (Eze, 2020; Onyeukwu, 2022). Moreover, heavy-handed tactics risk civilian harm, displacement, and further alienation of communities that depend on artisanal mining for survival, thereby fueling recruitment into armed groups.

Another feature of the nexus is the role of cross-border smuggling and transnational networks. Illicit mineral flows frequently cross-national boundaries, linking local miners to foreign buyers, middlemen, and informal export channels. These transnational connections make interdiction complex, requiring regional cooperation and intelligence-led disruption of market channels rather than only on-site enforcement (Ogundele, 2023). The result is a hybrid criminal economy that is resilient to single-agency interventions.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on State Fragility Theory, also known as the Theory of State Fragility. The theory was propounded by Rotberg in 2003 in his seminal work *State Failure and State Weakness in a Time of Terror*, where he argued that fragile states are characterized by limited capacity and weak political will to perform core functions such as maintaining security, enforcing laws, and delivering basic public services. Since its formulation, the theory has been further refined by several scholars and institutions. Carment (2007) expanded the framework by introducing a multidimensional approach that integrates political, economic, and social indicators in assessing state fragility. Similarly, Susan and Patrick (2008) advanced the theory through the development of the *Index of State Weakness*, which provides an empirical measurement of state performance across governance, security, economic management, and social welfare dimensions. At the institutional level, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) broadened the analytical scope of the theory beginning from 2008, with subsequent refinements in 2011, 2016, and 2018, to include variables such as societal cohesion, economic inclusion, institutional resilience, and environmental vulnerability, thereby strengthening the theory's applicability to contemporary state fragility and development challenges.

The core assumptions of the theory are that state legitimacy and capacity are central to stability; fragility is multidimensional, often manifesting in insecurity, economic exclusion, and weak governance; it creates a vacuum that non-state actors and violent groups frequently fill; and once a state becomes fragile, the condition tends to be self-reinforcing. Fragile states often struggle with legitimacy, experience an institutional breakdown, and fail to meet the basic needs of their citizens. These conditions foster the

rise of parallel authorities, violent groups, and alternative economies, all of which contribute to continued instability.

However, the theory has faced various criticisms as advanced by other scholars. For instance, it has been criticized on two major grounds. First is its tendency to overgeneralize and reflect a Western bias in defining what constitutes a strong state, often ignoring indigenous governance systems and contextual realities. Second, it is criticized for neglecting the role of external influences, such as colonial legacies, international financial pressures, and multinational corporate exploitation, which significantly contribute to the fragility of many states. These critiques point out that fragility is not solely an internal failure, but also a consequence of historical and global power dynamics.

Application of the Theory

Taraba State, like many resource-rich regions in Sub-Saharan Africa, displays the paradoxes of abundance and fragility that the Fragile State Theory seeks to explain. The state's rich deposits of minerals such as gold, sapphire, baryte, and other solid minerals have become a magnet for informal and illegal economic activities, mirroring the dynamics described by Gelbard et al. (2015), who argue that political instability in fragile states is often exacerbated by insufficient public services, poor economic management, and the inability to respond to shocks. In Taraba, the abundance of mineral wealth has encouraged rent-seeking behaviour among both state and non-state actors, narrowing the spectrum of inclusive economic opportunities and entrenching patterns of inequality that deepen poverty. This fuels community grievances and emboldens non-state actors to challenge the state's authority, governance capacity, and legitimacy (Stewart, 2000).

Like other fragile states in Africa (Nay, 2013), Taraba suffers from a governance structure in which those in the political and economic elite compete to control resource rents with little regard for the broader welfare of the population. The absence of robust rule-based governance, reflected in weak and under-resourced institutions, has allowed informal systems to flourish in the mining sector. Instead of strong institutions, strong individuals dominate, manipulating mining opportunities for personal enrichment and undermining the very institutions that could enforce transparency. This pattern fosters instability, characterised by informalisation of state functions, neopatrimonial politics, and exclusionary governance. Consequently, the state's territorial control over mining areas is weak, its legitimacy eroded by the perception that regulatory enforcement is selective, and its ability to mediate disputes undermined by internal political rivalries and corruption.

The effects of this fragility are visible in the unregulated artisanal mining hubs of Karim-Lamido, Sardauna, Takum, and Gashaka, where the state's security presence is minimal. These areas have become attractive to illegal miners, local conflict entrepreneurs, and cross-border actors from Cameroon and beyond, who smuggle minerals without interference. The absence of effective territorial governance invites criminal infiltration and generates localised disputes over mining rights, sometimes escalating into

violence. Jones (2013) notes that such dynamics loss of state autonomy, legitimacy crises, and contested control over resources are defining features of fragile states across Africa.

Nigeria's broader national fragility compounds Taraba's situation. As Asua, Ugwueze, and Onah (2021) highlight, Nigeria ranks among the most terrorised countries in the world, with deep poverty, unemployment, and institutional weakness fuelling social unrest. At the sub-national level, these conditions manifest in Taraba's inability to enforce the Nigerian Minerals and Mining Act (2007) and the Minerals and Mining Regulations (2011) effectively. Agencies such as the State Mineral Resources and Environmental Management Committee (MIREMCO) lack the manpower, funding, and logistical capacity to monitor far-flung mining sites. This gap allows unlicensed mining operations to expand unchecked, depriving the government of revenue and reinforcing the perception of a disengaged or complicit state.

Nwangwu (2021) observes that when state capacity is weak, control over resource rents is monopolised by political actors who distribute them through patron-client networks, fuelling underground economies. In Taraba, this reality is evident in the mining sector, where politically shielded actors and their local allies engage in unlicensed mineral extraction, often in collaboration with foreign smugglers. This networked criminality blurs the lines between legal and illegal economies, further undermining state sovereignty. The fragile state environment thus enables the persistence of illegal artisanal mining, while the mining economy itself reinforces fragility by entrenching elite capture, eroding legitimacy, and weakening institutional authority.

The Fragile State Theory illuminates why the regulatory frameworks governing mineral resources in Taraba remain largely ineffective between 2015 and 2024. The state's limited enforcement capacity, loss of legitimacy, and inability to secure mining territories have created a self-perpetuating cycle in which illicit mining thrives, government revenue declines, and the authority of the state is increasingly challenged. Unless Taraba addresses these three interlinked pillars of fragility capacity, legitimacy, and security the illegal artisanal mining economy will continue to expand, deepening the very fragility that enables its survival.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to examine the relationship between illegal artisanal mining and banditry in six mining-prone LGAs of Taraba State (Bali, Gashaka, Sardauna, Wukari, Yororo, and Ibi) from 2015 to 2024. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, field observations, and secondary documents from government reports and academic publications. Twenty-five participants were recruited via snowball sampling based on thematic saturation, including miners, community leaders, and security personnel. Data analysis combined thematic analysis of primary data to identify patterns in regulatory failures and banditry links, and content analysis of secondary documents to reveal policy inconsistencies and implementation challenges. The descriptive qualitative design was chosen because it allows for an in-depth, contextualized exploration of the

complex, sensitive, and under-researched relationship between illegal artisanal mining and banditry, capturing the lived experiences and perceptions of hard-to-reach participants through triangulated data sources that quantitative methods cannot adequately provide.

Presentation of Data and Discussion of Findings

The Nature and character Artisanal mining in Taraba State between 2015 and 2024.

The nature of artisanal mining in Taraba State across Bali, Gashaka, Sardauna, Wukari, Yorro, and Ibi is shaped by poverty, unemployment, and lack of viable alternatives, driving individuals into informal mining. Findings revealed that mining expansion corresponds closely with rising rural impoverishment and agricultural decline. Respondents described mining as economic survivalism to cope with hardship, joblessness, and food insecurity. This reflects the national context where approximately 63% of Nigerians are multidimensionally poor, with rural areas disproportionately affected (NBS, 2022). Similarly, the World Bank (2023) reports youth unemployment above 40%, compelling many young people in rural communities to rely on informal sectors like artisanal mining to sustain livelihoods.

A youth leader from Bali LGA emphasized this reality during an FGD, stating that:

There are no jobs for our youths here. Farming used to help us before, but things have changed. We cannot rely on farming anymore. Mining gives us daily income, even if it is small. (FGD, Bali LGA, 10th October 2025)

The testimony above illustrates the precarious economic landscape confronting young people in Taraba's rural communities. Respondents in Wukari and Ibi LGAs further explained that the high cost of farm inputs, erratic rainfall patterns, and limited access to markets have rendered farming less viable, prompting a mass shift toward artisanal mining. According to Hilson (2016) and Banchirigah (2020), this trend is consistent with broader African experiences where deteriorating agrarian conditions and lack of rural employment push marginalized populations into small-scale mining as a last resort for survival.

Oruonye et al. (2023) observed that in northern Nigeria, particularly Taraba and Zamfara States, artisanal mining has become a critical informal safety net amid economic stagnation and weak industrial capacity. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019) notes that artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) absorbs millions of underemployed rural youths globally, functioning as an alternative livelihood where state policies have failed to generate sustainable employment. The World Bank's Delve ASM Country Profile for Nigeria (2022) highlights that over 500,000 Nigerians are directly involved in artisanal mining, with many more indirectly dependent on the sector. Furthermore, community members perceive artisanal mining not only as a livelihood but also as a social safety valve where government presence is weak and access to education or credit is minimal. In Yorro and Gashaka LGAs, participants disclosed that mining provides immediate cash income compared to seasonal, unpredictable agriculture,

aligning with Tschakert and Singha (2007), who argue that the immediacy of financial returns often outweighs long-term environmental and health risks for poor households in developing economies.

The evidence across the six study areas thus reveals that the socio-economic drivers of artisanal mining in Taraba State are deeply embedded in structural poverty, unemployment, and rural underdevelopment. These factors not only motivate engagement in mining but also perpetuate its persistence, as limited state intervention and weak institutional support leave residents with few alternatives. As Hilson and Maconachie (2017) emphasize, the prevalence of artisanal mining in resource-rich but impoverished regions is symptomatic of the “governance gap” that forces citizens to depend on informal extractive practices as coping strategies. Hence, in Taraba State, artisanal mining represents both a response to economic exclusion and a manifestation of the state’s developmental shortcomings.

Similarly, a female participant from Gashaka LGA revealed the growing feminization of artisanal mining and the survivalist nature of women’s involvement in related informal activities. She offered a detailed account of this livelihood shift:

Before, life was hard but predictable; we farmed and knew the seasons, but now the cost of living consumes everything, forcing us to become different people. The mines, once a place for young men, have become our only hope, especially for widows and women who lost their farms to erosion. We do not dig for gold; instead, we carry pots for miles to sell food by the dangerous pits, feeding hungry miners because we are desperate. The little money we earn is not for profit but to buy food for our children that same evening. This is a dangerous life of dust, fights, and fear, but watching a child cry from hunger is unthinkable. We have moved from farmers on our own land to servants of the mines a sign that farming has failed and the government has forgotten us. (FGD, Gashaka LGA, 8th September, 2025).

This testimony underscores the reality that artisanal mining has become an economic refuge for both men and women, particularly for vulnerable groups such as widows and female-headed households. The respondent’s narrative reflects a broader pattern in which rural poverty, food insecurity, and declining agricultural returns have pushed entire communities into dependence on informal mining and related services. As Asiedu (2020) and Hilson (2016) argue, the prevalence of women in artisanal mining communities across Africa illustrates not only gendered poverty but also the absence of formal livelihood safety nets in rural economies.

Field evidence across the six study areas indicates that artisanal mining is not limited to the extraction of minerals but also supports a secondary economy involving food vending, transportation, and petty trading around mining sites. Many women participate indirectly, selling cooked food, water, or fuel to

miners, thereby sustaining themselves and their dependents. This finding aligns with the observations of Hentschel, Hruschka, and Priester (2002), who noted that artisanal mining generates extensive “shadow employment,” sustaining millions of people indirectly through support services in mining communities. The study identifies poverty and unemployment as key drivers of artisanal mining, alongside agricultural decline from high input costs, reduced farm access, and erratic rainfall (NBS, 2022; FAO, 2021). Economic hardship in Gashaka LGA reflects World Bank (2023) findings on inflation, food insecurity, and fuel subsidy removal worsening poverty in Taraba. Youths and women see mining as their only survival option due to lack of rural jobs and collapsed cooperatives. Oruonye et al. (2023) and Banchirigah (2020) confirm similar trends across Taraba, Ghana, and Nigeria. Across all six study areas, mining is seen as more profitable, flexible, and immediate than farming, offering daily income without seasonal dependence.

In Yorro LGA, a farmer-turned-miner explained this shift in livelihood preference during an interview:

I used to farm yam and maize, but I stopped because of poor harvests. In mining, you can get something every day, even if it's not much. Farming takes a whole season before you see results. Sometimes, after working for months, the rain will destroy everything, or you can't even afford fertilizer. With mining, even if the work is hard, you go home with money that same day to feed your family. *(Interview, Yorro LGA, 14th October 2025)*

This statement reflects a rational adaptation to changing economic conditions. The participant's decision to leave farming mirrors a broader trend in rural Nigeria, where agricultural livelihoods are being displaced by informal extractive activities. According to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), over 70% of Taraba's population depends on agriculture, yet low productivity, erratic rainfall, and inadequate infrastructural support continue to undermine returns. As observed by Hilson (2016), when smallholder farmers experience recurrent crop failures and unstable prices, they often diversify into artisanal mining to secure quick monetary returns that meet daily consumption needs.

Similarly, in Wukari LGA, a local trader highlighted the multiplier effect of artisanal mining on the informal economy:

Before the miners arrived, this area was quiet with slow business as we mainly farmed. Now, miners arrive with daily cash, buying food, drinks, and supplies in large quantities. My mobile credit sales have tripled, and selling fuel for their generators is now highly profitable. This mining has created a bustling market, employing young men as motorcycle riders and women as food vendors. Everyone finds a way to get a small piece of the daily cash flow. While not formal employment, mining has put food on the table for many families with no other opportunities. *(Interview with a Local Trader, Wukari LGA, 15th October 2025)*

This perspective underscores the economic spillover of mining on rural enterprise. Mining settlements serve as new marketplaces that sustain petty traders, food vendors, and transport operators. This aligns with the findings of Hentschel, Hruschka, and Priester (2002), who noted that artisanal mining supports extensive backward and forward linkages, generating indirect employment in the informal sector. In Taraba State, mining communities such as those in Bali and Gashaka have witnessed the rise of temporary trading centers where local commerce thrives on miners' daily expenditure.

Most respondents viewed artisanal mining as more economically rewarding than farming, while others valued its flexibility and low entry barrier. A minority preferred agriculture due to cultural attachment and long-term stability despite declining income. These findings align with Oruonye et al. (2023), who noted mining serves as informal employment for rural populations facing agricultural decline. However, participants in Sardauna and Ibi LGAs expressed concern that the shift to mining has diverted youth labor from farming, threatening local food production. A community elder in Sardauna LGA provided a stark illustration of this dynamic during an FGD, stating:

Our farms are empty now; they are silent and overgrown because the young men, the strong arms we relied on, have all gone to the mining sites chasing fast money, and even when the good rains come as they did last season, no one is left here who wants to plant or harvest anymore, so we who are left behind are forced to buy food from outside the community with the little money we have, which makes everything more expensive and breaks our old cycle of self-sufficiency. (FGD, Sardauna LGA, 19th October 2025).

This sentiment reflects the agro-economic displacement resulting from unregulated mining activities. Similar findings have been reported by Tschakert (2009) and Banchirigah (2020), who argue that the expansion of artisanal mining in West Africa has contributed to rural labor shortages, increased food prices, and weakened community cohesion. In Nigeria, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2021) observed that the migration of rural labor from agriculture to mining is one of the major factors exacerbating food insecurity in mineral-rich states such as Zamfara, Kebbi, and Taraba.

Beyond economic implications, respondents highlighted social transformations from artisanal mining, including increased consumerism, dependency on informal markets, and youth and women drawn to mining for both financial reasons and social prestige associated with quick income, similar to findings by Hilson and Garforth (2013) in Ghana. These changes have eroded traditional agrarian values, disrupted family labor systems, and increased vulnerability to poverty cycles when mining yields decline. Evidently, artisanal mining has evolved into an alternative economic structure in Taraba's rural economy, directly sustaining miners while indirectly benefiting traders, transporters, and service providers. However, perceived profitability comes at significant socio-environmental costs, as labor diversion from agriculture, loss of arable land, and dependency on unstable mining income threaten rural livelihood sustainability. As Bryceson and Jönsson (2010) contend, artisanal mining presents a "poverty trap paradox" an

immediate escape from destitution that reinforces long-term vulnerability due to its informal and extractive nature.

The field data reveal that the spatial distribution of mineral deposits plays a decisive role in shaping the intensity, mobility, and organization of artisanal mining across Taraba State. The availability of economically valuable minerals such as gold, baryte, and tourmaline has created multiple mining hotspots, particularly in Ibi, Gashaka, Bali, and Sardauna LGAs, where informal extraction activities have intensified since 2015. Respondents consistently linked the emergence of new mining camps to the discovery of fresh mineral deposits, a phenomenon locally described as a “gold rush” pattern. A local council official in Ibi LGA provided insight into this dynamic movement of miners, explaining that:

It begins quietly when one person finds mineral traces; word spreads rapidly, transforming a site within a week into a bustling camp of tents and miners. Miners arrive without permits, driven by hope, attracting a spontaneous economy of food and supply traders. By the time the local council responds hampered by remote locations and slow bureaucracy powerful outsiders have already organized ore transport and secured local complicity. The most devastating consequences are lasting environmental damage, unsecured pits causing injuries, and ruined farmland. This cycle, worsened by weak institutional response and violent conflicts over new veins, leaves a trail of social problems and destruction. (Interview, Local Council Official, Ibi LGA, 22nd November 2025)

The council official's account captures the rush-and-disperse dynamics of artisanal mining: rapid inflows, makeshift economies, and immediate environmental harm (Hilson, 2016; Banchirigah, 2020). It highlights three structural constraints: remoteness and poor infrastructure hindering enforcement (NGSA, 2022), fast informal mobilization outpacing regulation (Hilson & Maconachie, 2017), and intermediaries creating unchecked market channels (NEITI, 2022). The co-opting of chiefs by outsiders reflects elite capture and illicit mining's political economy (Oruonye et al., 2023). Health and ecological consequences, like children falling into pits and stream contamination, align with ASM impact assessments (Garba et al., 2024; Donker et al., 2006).

In Gashaka LGA, a miner described how the rapid dissemination of information about new mineral finds fuels intense competition:

A new gold discovery spreads like wildfire, instantly transforming a site into a frenzied camp of hopeful miners digging by hand, sleeping by pits, and facing the daily dangers of accidents and mercury exposure, all driven by the dream of a life-changing find. This volatile environment frequently erupts into violent conflicts over mining rights, buyer access, and even social disputes,

as the sudden presence of cash turns every resource into a contested prize. When the vein is inevitably exhausted, the miners depart for the next rumor, leaving behind a scarred landscape of holes and poisoned streams, while the local community is left grappling with a fractured economy and health issues. The miners express a clear desire for safer tools, formal training, and legal market access, but feel abandoned by a system that offers only empty promises, forcing them to continue this destructive cycle in a perpetual state of hope. (FGD, Gashaka LGA, 8th November 2025).

This FGD account reveals the volatility of artisanal mining camps: initial optimism followed by conflict, health risks from mercury exposure, and environmental abandonment (Hilson, 2016; Tschakert & Singha, 2007). Fights over claims and immediate cash buyers intensify rivalry and violence (Geenen, 2012; Ogundele, 2023). Mercury handling aligns with environmental health findings (Donker et al., 2006; Garba et al., 2024). The plea for safer tools, training, and legal market access reflects formalization proposals, but highlights the implementation gap where community needs remain unmet (Hilson & Maconachie, 2017; World Bank, 2022).

In Taraba State, the rush-and-abandon cycle of artisanal mining reflects short-term exploitation as miners quickly relocate once deposits are exhausted, leaving degraded landscapes, open pits, and deforested areas (NGSA, 2022). This process depletes natural resources, disrupts traditional land-use systems, and displaces farmers, contributing to rural livelihood insecurity. The influx of external actors from Zamfara, Niger, and Plateau brings capital but exacerbates local tensions over resource ownership, eroding community cohesion and sparking violent disputes between indigenous and migrant miners (Oruonye et al., 2023).

The absence of spatial regulation allows informal camps in ecologically fragile areas, encroaching on forest reserves and water sources, leading to irreversible environmental degradation, soil erosion, and loss of arable land (Hilson & Yakovleva, 2007). Mineral resources thus act as a centripetal force attracting miners while generating centrifugal social and environmental disruption, shaped more by geological discoveries than institutional regulation. The persistence of artisanal mining is tied to entrenched poverty, unemployment, weak institutional presence, and systemic corruption, as state institutions have largely abdicated their responsibilities, creating a vacuum filled by informal and illegal mining activities.

A respondent from Bali LGA, a young miner and community representative, provided a detailed account of this systemic neglect, explaining:

The government feels like a distant story; officials only appear during crises or gold discoveries, but they don't monitor our safety or offer better techniques. Sometimes they collect bribes and

leave, and we have never received training or help from the Ministry of Mines. We are not against the government, but they don't care about our future; they only come with police and soldiers to arrest people and seize equipment. They never solve the problems of poverty or offer us alternatives. After they leave, the site reopens, and things continue the same way. Our hunger and our children's school fees have not been arrested; they are still here with us every single day (Interview, Bali LGA, 10th November 2025).

This extended testimony reflects the absence of developmental state presence at the grassroots level and the resulting erosion of public trust. The respondent's remarks highlight a dual problem: not only has the lack of proactive institutional engagement but also predatory governance practiced, where officials exploit mining communities through rent-seeking and selective enforcement. Similar patterns have been documented across Nigeria's artisanal mining regions, where weak oversight mechanisms and corruption have allowed illegal extraction networks to thrive (Hilson, 2016; Oruonye et al., 2023; NEITI, 2022).

Assess how weak regulatory governance of artisanal mining has financed, empowered, and sustained bandit groups, contributing to the rise of insecurity in Taraba State.

The growing intersection between artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) and insecurity in Nigeria has triggered security-oriented responses from both federal and state governments. As ASGM increasingly attracts non-state armed actors due to regulatory gaps and high economic returns, mining areas particularly in northern Nigeria have become flashpoints for banditry, kidnapping, arms smuggling, and other forms of violent criminality (Okoli & Ugwu, 2021). Consequently, the deployment of security forces has emerged as a central strategy for containing the security threats associated with informal mining operations.

Field data from mining communities in Taraba State reveal a combination of fear, adaptation, and cautious optimism among artisanal miners. In Dogon Yashi, a major mining site in Bali Local Government Area, miners reported heightened surveillance and stricter enforcement following the implementation of Executive Order No. 5. A local miner recounted that the area was previously regarded as a "no-go" zone due to frequent bandit attacks and kidnappings linked to gold mining activities. According to the respondent, the deployment of security forces has significantly reduced such incidents, making the area accessible again (Local Miner, Bali LGA, 15 September 2025).

This account underscores the strong link between unregulated artisanal mining and insecurity in mining zones. The transformation of Dogon Yashi into a crime-prone area illustrates how poorly governed mining sites attract criminal elements, particularly when mineral extraction becomes more profitable. The miner's reference to the presence of a gold processing machine is significant, as it indicates a level

of value addition that increases the site's economic attractiveness to armed groups. Studies have shown that when artisanal mining shifts toward more organized processing, it often draws the attention of predatory actors seeking to control or exploit the resource (Adeleke & Duru, 2021). At the same time, the reported decline in insecurity following security deployment aligns with findings that coordinated enforcement operations can disrupt criminal networks embedded in informal mining economies (Ibrahim & Kwaghdoo, 2023).

In Taraba State, regulatory efforts are further constrained by difficult terrain and porous borders with Cameroon, which facilitate cross-border movement of illegal miners, arms, and contraband. Although the state government established the Taraba State Mineral Resources Development Agency and initiated sensitization campaigns, enforcement remains uneven, particularly in remote areas such as Bali, Gashaka, and Sardauna, where regulatory agencies are under-resourced and face resistance from communities that depend economically on mining (Ibrahim & Kwaghdoo, 2022).

These challenges are reflected in the institutional response under Executive Order No. 5, signed into law on August 23, 2023. A respondent from the Taraba State Mobile Court explained that the executive order led to the creation of a special multi-agency task force and a mobile court empowered to patrol mining areas, arrest offenders, and prosecute cases promptly. Since its establishment, several arrests have been made, including those of foreign nationals from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Chad (Mobile Court Registrar, Jalingo LGA, 29 October 2025). This intervention represents a shift toward localized enforcement aimed at addressing the nexus between illegal mining, environmental degradation, and insecurity.

The involvement of foreign nationals highlights the transnational dimension of illegal artisanal mining in Taraba State. Existing studies link the participation of foreign actors in illegal mining to the expansion of illicit trade networks, arms trafficking, and community destabilization in Nigeria's border regions (Okoli & Ugwu, 2021). While the executive order and mobile court system demonstrate proactive state action, their effectiveness remains contingent on sustained political will, inter-agency coordination, and community cooperation.

Beyond logistical and jurisdictional challenges, internal compromise within enforcement agencies has emerged as a critical obstacle to effective regulation. Evidence suggests that some security and regulatory personnel leak operational information to illegal miners and armed groups, undermining enforcement efforts (Eze & Uchenna, 2021). This problem is particularly damaging in mining zones where illegal extraction overlaps with banditry, as it fosters impunity and erodes public trust in state institutions (Musa & Bello, 2022).

In Taraba State, residents of mining hotspots such as Bali, Gashaka, and parts of Sardauna have reported repeated enforcement failures despite frequent task force operations. According to Tanko and Gwaza

(2021), the persistence of illegal mining and insecurity in these areas cannot be attributed solely to terrain or logistics; rather, internal collusion and compromised intelligence play a significant role. This was corroborated by the chairman of the state's special task force, who noted that illegal miners often vacated sites shortly before raids. The situation changed only after all task force members' phones were confiscated prior to an operation, leading to successful arrests (Chairman, Special Task Force, Jalingo LGA, 29 October 2025). This account illustrates how internal sabotage can neutralize enforcement efforts and how simple countermeasures can yield immediate results.

Logistical and financial constraints further weaken government regulation of artisanal mining. Across Nigeria, enforcement agencies often lack adequate vehicles, communication equipment, and funding to sustain operations in remote mining areas (Akinola & Ilesanmi, 2022). In Taraba State, poor road networks, rugged terrain, and underfunded task forces severely limit access to mining sites in Gashaka, Bali, and Sardauna. A community member from Gashaka lamented that enforcement teams frequently fail to respond promptly due to vehicle breakdowns or fuel shortages, allowing illegal miners to escape before any intervention occurs (Community Dweller, Gashaka LGA, 12 November 2025).

Funding challenges also affect personnel morale and operational sustainability. A task force official revealed that delays in allowances, lack of fuel, and inadequate vehicle maintenance make consistent enforcement nearly impossible (Task Force Official, 29 November 2025). Scholars argue that such chronic underfunding creates a power imbalance in which illegal mining networks often better financed and locally embedded outmatch state institutions (Okonkwo & Aluko, 2021; Tanko & Gwaza, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study conclusively demonstrates that in Taraba State, the phenomenon of artisanal mining and the emerging threat of banditry are not isolated issues but are intrinsically linked through a common root: state fragility. The failure of regulatory frameworks stemming from constitutional ambiguities, weak institutional capacity, geographical constraints, and systemic corruption has created a permissive environment where illegal mining thrives. This regulatory vacuum does more than just cause environmental degradation; it actively fuels insecurity. The lucrative, ungoverned mineral economy attracts and finances criminal networks, creates territorial disputes, and erodes the state's legitimacy and monopoly on violence. The livelihoods provided by artisanal mining, while a critical survival mechanism for a impoverished population, are precarious and come at the high cost of long-term community stability, food security, and public safety. Without decisive intervention to address this core governance deficit, Taraba State risks following the trajectory of northwestern Nigeria, where artisanal mining has become a primary driver of widespread banditry and a severe national security crisis.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

- i. The Federal Government and Taraba State Government should create a permanent, multi-agency task force for high-risk LGAs like Gashaka, Ibi, and Sardauna. This task force should integrate representatives from mining, environment, police, and civil defence agencies for coordinated action. Its mandate should be dual: dismantle criminal networks controlling mining sites while facilitating formalization of artisanal miners into cooperatives.
- ii. Government must recognize that poverty and agricultural collapse drive artisanal mining, requiring regulatory efforts to be paired with viable economic alternatives. In partnership with international development agencies, design and fund a targeted programme for mining communities. The programme should have two pillars: Agricultural Revitalization (climate-resilient seeds, low-interest loans, agro-processing facilities) and Skills and Enterprise Development (vocational training, seed grants for SMEs).

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