



Search for gold.
A woman digs at a shallow mine in Rupa sub-county to get gold.
PHOTOS BY DAVID MAFABI

Gold doesn't shine bright on people's livelihood in Karamoja

Not all that glitters.

Karamoja may have been identified as one of the places with the best gold deposits in the world, however, local miners are yet to enjoy the benefits of the precious mineral writes David Mafabi.

For Patrick Lotyang, working in a gold mine in Loolong in Rupa Sub-county, Moroto District is the best activity and source of income. Every morning he goes underground into a mine that is about 50ft by 80ft. It looks like a risky-looking

hole, which the community has dug to excavate gold out of the dusty hillside.

The 27-year-old Lotyang disappears deep down into the darkness underneath for hours, without any protective gear to cover even his head. All he has is the light tied firmly on his head to enable him see where he is going and what he is doing. He then emerges from time to time with a container filled with soil and sand, which he prays will contain at least a gram worth of gold.

While he is busy underground, his wife Ms Anna Ayopo and their two teenage daughters, among other teenagers are making round trips to the nearest water point to collect water to wash the earth and sieve out the gold.

Although these children are of school-going age, they can't stay at home or go to school without food so they have had to abandon school altogether, and join their

parents to make a living.

"This job has enabled us survive the long drought and it earns us money to get food and buy clothes for the family," Ayopo says as she hunches over her washing basin.

She adds, "We are not the only ones here, there are many other people and all of us get something for our families."

Across Karamoja, artisanal miners in Lopedo, Kaabong, look for gold in deep trenches and pits dug underground. Daily in Loolong, Katikikire, Rupa, Tapac and Pupu sub-counties in Moroto, the search for gold is as intense as ever, despite the

fact that the gold stocks are stored away at long distances, underground.

Gifted by nature

Karamoja is richly blessed with yet unexploited mineral resources. Mr. J. Angella, the vice chairman of Moroto District Mineral Wash platform says there are over 50 different minerals and precious stones in Karamoja including gold, silver, copper, iron, titanium, manganese, cobalt, niobium, tantalite, chrome, and rare earth and radioactive minerals.

"Gold is found in the entire Matheniko County in a belt stretching from the north to south in Karamoja in the Upe area, which experts say is one of the world's largest deposits with the highest levels of purity," Mr. Angella explains.

A 2011 survey by the Uganda department of geological survey and mines at the Ministry of Energy found that Karamoja is also endowed with other minerals including limestone, uranium, marble, graphite, gypsum, iron, wolfram, nickel, cobalt, lithium and tin.

The copper fields are situated in Jie County and along the Kenya-Uganda border. Other mineral deposits in Karamoja are mica, green and red garnets, beryl, cuprite, haematite, talc, graphite, columbite, magnetite, platinum, and zircon.

10 grams

To earn big. To collect Sh50,000 in revenue, a miner needs to collect at least 10 grams of gold.



Revenue. "Overall, the revenues from the mining sector are not properly tracked making it difficult to generate sufficient revenues for the benefit of the people of Karamoja," ANDREW KEEM NAPAJA, MOROTO LCV CHAIRPERSON

Cost of a gram of Gold Shs8000

The price of gold

Lotyang says he sells a point (gram) of gold at Shs8,000, so if he is to make Shs50,000, he has to sell not less than 10 points of gold, which is rather difficult.

"Because mining here depends on luck, some individuals take a week without collecting a point. It is the Somalis and Chinese who penetrate the communities in search of the mineral who normally buy this gold," said Lotyang.

The LCV chairperson for Moroto Mr Andrew Keem Napaja says that although gold is expensive, the local pricing of the mineral continues to be low with continuous exploitation from middlemen characterised by payment in kind.

"The buyers now come with sachets of waragi and give it to the locals in exchange for gold. For example a box of the waragi in sachets, which is sold at Shs7,500 is exchanged for a point of gold. These people are actually killing us with waragi," said Mr Napaja, adding, "Overall, the revenues from the mining sector are not properly tracked making it difficult to generate sufficient revenues for the benefit of the people of Karamoja."

The LCIII chairman for Rupa Sub-county Mr Apollo Majori told the visiting EU delegation who was there to appraise themselves of the development challenges and opportunities in Karamoja, that most of the artisanal and small scale miners and other communities ask for help from the government to enable them support their families but that they only get empty promises.

"And the authorities supposed to help us, offer no voice as we are being exploited; there are no workable solutions in return to the much-desired development that Karamoja needs but there is only disgruntlement and abuse of human rights," said Mr Majori.

Although exploitation of minerals in Karamoja started in the 1980s, Mr Charles Kibiswa, the programme director of Ecological Christian Organisation (ECO) that operates in Karamoja sub-region, says there are no clear records showing either the amount of resources extracted annually or the benefits the region has realised.

"There is no transparency and accountability in the management of revenue from the extractive sector, people are just mining it informally and selling it informally at times without licenses," Mr Kibiswa explained. Funded by European Union, Ecological Christian Organisation (ECO) is an indigenous, NGO working to improve the quality of life and sustainable livelihoods of the marginalised, underserved and vulnerable groups in Uganda while building a sustainable future.

A report by Global Witness, 2017, says many of the world's worst environmental and human rights abuses are driven by the exploitation of natural resources and corruption in the global political and economic system. The report criticises the Ugandan mining industry, describing it as "infested with corruption from bottom to top".

Working conditions. Lotyang relaxes after coming out of the mine. The only gear he has is the light to guide him through the mine.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Union has made the following recommendations to the government of Uganda

- Recognise the communities in Karamoja as indigenous peoples and recognise their rights over land traditionally occupied and used.
- Implement a land tenure registration system that increases security of ownership, particularly for communal land owners.
- Implement procedures to consult with the peoples of Karamoja, working

transparently through their own representative institutions and local governments in order to obtain their free and informed consent prior to approving or commencing any project affecting their lands, including granting exploration licenses and mining leases.

- Expand Uganda's existing legal requirement to conduct environmental impact assessments (EIAs) to bring it in line with international best practices for comprehensive and transparent social and environmental assessments.

Land grabbing

Another of the problems the local leaders allege is that the government is conniving with unknown people to fence off huge chunks of mineral-rich land for their private business under the guise of conserving the environment. The LCV chairman for Abim, Mr Jimmy Ocheri, said dubious mine investors have acquired land titles without the knowledge of the local people and are threatening to evict them. Also, Rev Joseph Abura, the Church of Uganda Bishop for Moroto said the government and dubious private investors induce local leaders and elders with money, food and other petty goodies to have them sign giveaway contracts.

"There has to be some kind of understanding between the government and the invaders. Higher authorities take advantage of our village leaders' ignorance to give away land," said Rev Abura.

"Our elders, who are the custodians of land cannot read or write; so how does one allege that they signed the contracts? Our people are just given maize, little posho and sachets of waragi and told to thumbprint here and there. It is inhumane to exploit someone's ignorance for selfish reasons," said Mr Ocheri.

However, the minister for Karamoja affairs Mr John Byabagambi said they are not aware of such happenings.

"Actually as government we don't know the people involved in the mining and exploitation that is prevalent in the mining sector in Karamoja. I am aware that there is lack of regulation for the ASM sector considering that it employs over 20,000 people in the region, 80 per cent being women and children," said Mr Byabagambi.

He also said the full range of economic, social and environmental costs and benefits of large scale mining (LSM) and artisanal and small scale mining (ASM) remain unclear in Karamoja, adding that there is clear evidence that if the ASM sector is well developed, it has the potential to stir economic development in the region and empower the Karimojong economically.

"The food insecurity question in Karamoja stretches the daily earnings since most of these miners are women and as such traditionally sole breadwinners of their families. As a result miners, especially women, work for food leaving no savings thus making families vulnerable to poverty," Mr Byabagambi added.

The minister of energy and mineral development Ms Irene Muloni, said speculators have been holding licences

for many years and they are not sensitive to the needs of the locals.

"We are not aware of the exploitation of the indigenous people but we are aware that it is the locals who were engaged in small-scale gold mining; we are not also aware of the illegal activities because we expect people to officially apply for licenses," said Ms Muloni.

Health of the people

Also, Dr L. C. Rossanigo, the Moroto diocese health advisor said as a result underground mining without protective gear, many miners are emaciated and afflicted by respiratory diseases as they feed poorly and work for long hours using heavy sledge hammers. The doctor says that the local miners are likely to suffer from decreased life expectancy; increased frequency of cancer of the trachea, bronchus, lung, stomach, and liver; increased frequency of pulmonary tuberculosis (PTB); and pleural diseases.

"There will also be increased frequency of insect-borne diseases, such as malaria and dengue fever; noise-induced hearing loss; increased prevalence of certain bacterial and viral diseases; and diseases of the blood and skin," said Dr Rossanigo.

The European Union head of delegation H.E. Ambassador-designate Attilio Pacifici said although mining is one of the activities geared towards poverty eradication, it remains an elusive goal for most government leaders in Uganda and other developing countries.

"In Karamoja, the economic aspect of mining has overshadowed ecological and social needs in context of host communities. Karamoja is being exploited and left with nothing," said Mr Pacifici.

He explained that although mineral resource mining activities are still in their infancy, environmental degradation is visible and human rights violations and escalating disagreements between communities are also evident.

The French Ambassador to Uganda Ms Stephanie Rivoal urged the government to support mining communities to maximise their benefits by empowering them on their mining rights and entitlements, and formalising benefit agreements between host communities and mining companies.

"But government should also address the issue of surface rights through ensuring that the local and district leadership takes lead in organising their communities into associations and registering most of the communally owned land," said Ms Rivoal.