

Will Busoga's mineral jackpot transform lives?

EAST

By George Bita

For years, Faisal Bwire's routine revolved around card games in Nsango trading centre, Namayingo district. On good days, he walked home with modest winnings. On bad days, he accumulated debts from friends who kept him in the game after his cash ran out. "But that is not the case anymore after gold deposits were discovered in the local government in 2012. Nowadays, I wake up to go seek gold nuggets as a small-scale miner," Bwire says.

He is among a growing number of residents whose lives have shifted dramatically following mineral discoveries across Busoga. From gold fields in Namayingo district to rare earth deposits in Bugiri, Bugweri and Mayuge, and uranium prospects in Buyende, the sub-region is increasingly being viewed as a potential economic powerhouse. Yet questions remain: how much of this wealth will truly benefit local communities?

GOLD RUSH IN NAMAYINGO

At Nsango gold mine, open-cast operations draw more than 250 casual labourers daily, Jowadu Lusala, the site manager, says. The activity has created jobs and injected cash into the local economy. "Even though we lose millions of revenue due to their rudimentary working conditions, our waste is further processed elsewhere. Our ore wastes still possess gold and it is collected by large-scale miners from the neighbouring Busia district," Lusala says.

He adds that on average, the site generates sh300,000 per day from extracted gold nuggets.

Local leaders confirm the impact. Adero Okello, the Buchumba parish chief, testifies that open-cast mines spread across Namayingo are improving household incomes. Families that once relied solely on subsistence farming are now earning from mining-related activities, including food vending and lodging

FACT CHECK

250

The number of casual labourers at Nsango gold mine daily.

Workers filter crushed ore so as to get gold nuggets at Kifuyo mine in Namayingo district



PHOTOS BY GEORGE BITA

services.

RARE EARTH PROMISE, PRESSURE

Beyond gold, Busoga is home to vast deposits of rare earth elements (REEs). Exploration teams have been active since 2015 in Buwunga parish of Bugiri, Makuutu sub-county in Bugweri and Buwaaya zone in Mayuge district.

Martin Okoth, the Makuutu LC1 chairperson, notes a sharp rise in land value. An acre that cost sh2m in 2008 now goes for sh15m. However, he links the recent spike in land wrangles to the precious minerals beneath the soil.

STAKES ARE HIGH

Morris Tabaro, the regional inspector of mines for eastern Uganda, says a 2013 exploration valued the REEs at over \$370b. These elements are essential in manufacturing mobile phones, smart screens, glass and nuclear batteries, making them more valuable than Uganda's oil reserves, which the World Bank estimates at \$75b.

Yusuf Muziransa, the Bugweri LC5 chairperson, says project-affected persons (PAPs) are being compensated

for samples collected from their land.

"The people need to appreciate the general benefits for all. This will include employment opportunities at mining sites, income from lodging facilities and provision of food to miners," Muziransa says.

Still, the long-term distribution of benefits remains a concern, especially amid rising land disputes and speculation.

URANIUM, NUCLEAR AMBITIONS

In Buyende, recent uranium discoveries have prompted government promises of a nuclear power plant. Rebecca Kadaga, the First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of East African Affairs, says the project could transform the area.

"This is a step in the right direction. We need to have this plant in place soon. We need a smooth compensation process for PAPs and due concern for the surroundings to avert climate change effects," Kadaga says.

She also calls for the establishment of an institution specialising in nuclear studies to equip local youth with

relevant skills.

"This will not only educate young Basoga but also put food on their table. In fact, as locals, we deserve this lion's share of the mineral wealth," she suggests.

Her remarks reflect growing expectations that mineral wealth should directly uplift host communities rather than bypass them.

LICENSING HURDLES

Despite the optimism, artisanal and small-scale miners (ASM) face significant regulatory challenges. Under Ugandan law, all mining activities must be licensed.

Rose Nabwire, a miner at Buhere mining site in Namayingo, says she has tried for 10 years to obtain a licence without success.

"When I travelled to the Directorate of Geological Surveys and Mines in Entebbe, I was told somebody else applied for an exploratory licence for that area. However, the land in question is mine, which implies something isn't right somewhere," Nabwire laments.

Ruth Nangiya, who operates at the Banda mining site in Namayingo, says the online application process is difficult due to poor network connectivity.

Lusala argues that the Mining Licensing Regulations of 2019 disadvantage ASM, citing registration fees of sh500,000 and application fees of up to sh5m.

"Actually, an ASM is like somebody indulging in betting. It is very normal to take an entire week without chancing upon any gold nugget," the Nsango gold mine site manager claims.

John Bosco Bukya, the chairperson of ASM in Uganda, urges miners to formalise their operations to avoid illegality.

RESIDENTS SPEAK OUT



JANET NAMUSURO, RESIDENT OF MAMATALE VILLAGE, MAYUGE DISTRICT: Since our land has minerals, we should be benefiting the most. Let residents get mining jobs and our children be given scholarships through the corporate social responsibility of mining companies.



IDRA MUTAMBA, RESIDENT OF BUWUNGA PARISH, BUGIRI DISTRICT: I get curious about the way companies keep taking away samples for verification, yet actually, they are carrying away valuable minerals. When will this exploration stage end and real mining start?



FAZIRA NAMWASE, RESIDENT OF NKONDO VILLAGE, BUYENDE DISTRICT: We live on top of uranium deposits whose extraction is expected to start soon. From science lessons, we learnt that it is radioactive. I worry that it will affect us locals.



THOMAS ISABIRYE, RESIDENT OF MAKUUTU VILLAGE, BUGWERI DISTRICT: Ever since rare earth elements were discovered here, there have been a lot of land-grabbing cases. These minerals may turn out to be a curse rather than a blessing to us



A resident of Makuutu village in Bugweri points at a hole left on his farmland by an exploration team

GOVERNMENT ASSURANCES

Regional inspector Tabaro says many locals from Busoga are successfully acquiring licences through the online system.

"What you need to do is just provide proof that there are minerals in that area, have a constitution and board resolutions. Then, you must get a geologist to do the technicalities involved and then you are good to go," Tabaro explains.

He emphasises government policy prioritising Ugandans in mining ventures.

"Those who have challenges may just skip requirements. I am certain in the next 10 years, Ugar will dominate the mining sector," he claims.

Bukya advises miners to secure title deeds to licensing and prevent conflicts.