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EDITORIAL

Return to the Indigenous Cultural Value of Land Stewardship and Respect Nature's Rights: Ghanaian Farmers Should Resist the Sale of Ancestral Farmlands to Galamsey Operators

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Abstract

Illegal small-scale mining (galamsey) in Ghana threatens environmental integrity, public health, and socio-economic resilience. This editorial argues that ancestral farmlands must be protected, emphasizing that their sale to galamsey operators undermines indigenous cultural values of land stewardship and violates fundamental ecological rights. Using the Rights of Nature (RoN) framework, the paper highlights that ecosystems such as forests, rivers, and farmlands possess intrinsic rights to exist, thrive, and regenerate, which humans are ethically obliged to respect. Evidence demonstrates that galamsey causes soil degradation, mercury and cyanide contamination, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and long-term declines in agricultural productivity, affecting livelihoods, food security,

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and community health. Mining-induced destruction of sacred groves and ancestral landscapes further erodes cultural identity, social cohesion, and intergenerational knowledge. By adopting the Rights of Nature perspective, farmers, traditional authorities, and local leaders are called to safeguard communal lands, recognizing that short-term economic incentives cannot offset ecological and cultural losses. Upholding these rights promotes sustainable agriculture, environmental stewardship, and community resilience, ensuring that both human and non-human stakeholders benefit from a just and balanced ecological system. Protecting farmland under a Rights of Nature ethos is crucial for sustaining Ghana's socio-ecological future.

Introduction

Illegal small-scale mining, commonly known as galamsey, has stripped communities of environmental, cultural, and economic rights, creating multidimensional crises in Ghana. Farmlands entrusted to farmers as custodians are increasingly commoditized for short-term gain. Galamsey operators offer lump-sum payments to exploit land with toxic chemicals such as mercury and cyanide, which contaminate soils and water (Esdaile & Chalker, 2018; Mulenga et al., 2024). Beyond environmental damage, these practices violate the Rights of Nature, which recognizes that ecosystems possess inherent rights to exist, flourish, and regenerate (Adom, 2025a). Rivers, forests, and farmlands are rights-bearing entities whose health is inseparable from human welfare. Ignoring this principle exposes communities to persistent contamination, public health hazards (Gibb & O'Leary, 2014), and undermines indigenous stewardship ethics emphasizing care for land for future generations.

As Adom (2025b) asserts, "The failure to recognize nature's intrinsic rights creates a legal and moral vacuum where economic exploitation precedes ecological integrity, with irreversible consequences for human and non-human communities alike" (p. 5). This editorial explores the socio-economic, environmental, cultural, and public health consequences of selling ancestral farmlands to galamsey operators.

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1. Long-Term Loss of Livelihoods and Economic Stability

Agriculture is central to rural livelihoods and national food security. Farmlands are intergenerational assets, not disposable commodities. Research shows illegal mining destroys arable land, reduces productivity, and encourages farmers to abandon sustainable livelihoods, leaving long-term poverty in its wake (Donkor et al., 2024; Okoffo et al., 2023). Households in mining-affected areas often experience persistent welfare losses even after temporary income benefits diminish (Aragon & Rud, 2015; Banchirigah, 2008).

Through the Rights of Nature lens, Adom (2025b) emphasizes that "short-term financial incentives that harm ecosystems are ethically and legally indefensible because they compromise the rights of land, rivers, and forests to exist and regenerate" (p. 7). Resisting the sale of ancestral farmland protects intergenerational equity, environmental integrity, and long-term livelihoods.

2. Severe and Permanent Destruction of Nature

Galamsey operations cause deforestation, topsoil loss, river siltation, and ecosystem fragmentation (Amegbey et al., 2023; Hilson, 2002). Land rehabilitation is technically challenging and costly, often exceeding the value of extracted minerals (Agyeman et al., 2020; Forestry Commission of Ghana, 2020).

Mercury and cyanide persist for decades, bioaccumulating in ecosystems and threatening biodiversity (Esdaile & Chalker, 2018; Mulenga et al., 2024). Adom (2025a) warns that "By denying the land its rights, we amplify ecological collapse, threatening not only biodiversity but the very livelihoods of the communities that depend on these ecosystems" (para. 8). Elevated mercury exposure among children and adults in artisanal mining communities underscores these risks (Gibb & O'Leary, 2014; Nyarko et al., 2023).

3. Contamination of Air, Water Resources, and Public Health Risks

Mercury vapor from amalgam burning impairs neurological function, memory, and cognition, particularly in children (Gibb & O'Leary, 2014). Cyanide and mercury contamination of rivers—including Pra, Ankobra, Offin, and Birim—threatens drinking water, agriculture, and aquatic biodiversity (Armah et al., 2013).

Communities relying on untreated water face kidney disease, gastrointestinal illness, skin disorders, and developmental harm to unborn children (Gibb & O'Leary, 2014; Mulenga et al., 2024). Recognizing the Rights of Nature, Adom (2025b) notes that "Water bodies, like all ecosystems, hold intrinsic rights that humans must respect if we are to maintain societal and ecological resilience" (p. 9). Protecting these ecosystems is a legal, ethical, and moral obligation.

4. Erosion of Social Cohesion and Cultural Heritage

Ancestral farmlands hold spiritual, historical, and ecological significance. Sacred groves, ancestral trees, and burial sites conserve biodiversity and cultural memory (Poreku, 2014; Yangmaadome et al., 2012). Galamsey-driven destruction erases cultural identity and disrupts social cohesion.

Unauthorized land transactions often generate disputes and weaken traditional governance (Banchirigah, 2008; Hilson, 2002). Adom (2025a) emphasizes that recognizing ecosystem rights reinforces community cohesion: "When nature's rights are acknowledged, societal respect for the land and each other is reinforced, strengthening both ecological and cultural integrity" (para. 12).

Conclusion

Short-term financial gains from galamsey cannot compensate for ecological, cultural, or social losses. Integrating Rights of Nature principles with indigenous stewardship ethics provides a robust framework for protecting ancestral farmlands. Traditional authorities, farmers, and local leaders must resist inducements from illegal miners. Protecting ecosystems ensures sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and intergenerational equity, securing Ghana's socio-ecological future.

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Author- DA: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.