

UN agency plan tackles ‘hidden cost’ of gold, pave way for safer, mercury-free mining

From smartphones to wedding rings, the [hidden cost of everyday gold](#) is its threat to human and environmental health, according to a new United Nations-driven initiative launched on Monday that aims to tackle mercury-based mining methods.

As gold production exposes millions of men, women and children globally to toxic levels of mercury every year, a new \$180-million [Global Environment Facility](#)-backed Global Opportunities for the Long-term Development of the artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) sector (GEF GOLD) programme will improve conditions for miners across eight countries while slashing harmful mercury emissions.

“The widespread use of mercury in the artisanal and small-scale sector affects the environment and people, particularly in developing countries” said Philippe Scholtès, the [UN Industrial Development Organization](#)’s (UNIDO) Managing Director of Programme Development and Technical Cooperation.

The ASGM, which accounts for 20 per cent of the world’s annual gold production, is the single largest source of man-made mercury emissions, responsible for releasing of as much as 1,000 tonnes of mercury to the atmosphere annually.

“Mercury emissions impact health and ecosystems, contaminating the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe,” explained Joyce Msuya, Acting Executive Director of [UN Environment](#) (UNEP). “This is a long-term problem we need to confront now” to protect health, provide livelihoods and save the planet, she added.

Moreover, some 15 million people work in the ASGM sector, including 4.5 million women and over 600,000 children.

“By phasing out mercury use and connecting miners to markets for responsibly produced and sourced minerals, GEF GOLD will help to ensure the gold value chain both supports miners and provides consumers with access to ethically produced, environmentally sustainable gold,” said Jacob Duer, Head of UNEP’s Chemicals and Health branch.

Working on the edge

To sate the appetite for gold for jewelry, investment and consumer products, miners and processors often work in harsh conditions without industry protections on pay, health or safety, with many relying on toxic, mercury-based extraction methods.

“It is important to transform the extremely harmful practice using mercury in ASGM to protect the human health and ecosystem,” stressed Abdoulaye Mar Dieye, [UN Nations Development Programme](#), (UNDP) Director of the Policy and Programme Support Bureau.

Studies indicate that ASGM mercury exposure is a major, largely neglected global health problem that put miners and their communities at risk of brain damage; vision and hearing loss; and delayed childhood development.

While ASGM offers employment for rural populations, miners frequently operate on the edges of legality, with ASGM either banned outright or limited by legislation. GEF GOLD intends to secure miners’ livelihoods by supporting regulatory and policy reforms to formalize ASGM across the programme countries – opening market and finance access to increase incomes and enable mercury-free technology.

Additionally, the GEF GOLD programme will work with the private sector to promote compliance with international standards on responsible mineral supply chains.

Spanning eight countries, the five-year programme is a partnership between UNEP, UNDP, UNIDO, the Global Environment Facility, Conservation International and the governments of Burkina Faso, Colombia, Guyana, Indonesia, Kenya, Mongolia, the Philippines and Peru.