

# What lessons have we learned from Stilfontein?

By Bruce Kadalie

*The Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA) hosted an online Forum titled "Lessons from Stilfontein: towards a sustainable future for artisanal and small-scale mining in South Africa." Chaired by Martin Jansen of Workers World Media Productions, the panel examined the socio-economic and political dynamics shaping artisanal and small-scale mining and considered the way towards a more just and sustainable mining future.*





The Stilfontein disaster, which claimed the lives of almost 90 informal miners at the last count, has become a flashpoint for broader debates about governance, human rights, and economic justice in South Africa. As noted by Lawyers for Human Rights (LHR) the tragedy was not merely an accident but a "direct consequence of systemic neglect and the criminalisation of artisanal miners." The government's failure to address the dangers of abandoned mines and its punitive approach to artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of marginalised communities.

Similarly, Christopher Rutledge, Executive Director of Mining Affected Communities United in Action (MACUA), in a recent op-ed for *Business Day*, argues that the Stilfontein tragedy demands urgent action from institutions like the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) to hold the state accountable for its "dereliction of duty." These perspectives underscore the urgency of reimagining South Africa's mining sector – one that prioritises the lives and livelihoods of its people over corporate interests and short-term gains.

## The Stilfontein tragedy and the working-class struggle

Stilfontein is a mining town that encapsulates the struggles of the working class in South Africa. Speaking at the IFAA Forum, Rutledge powerfully articulated how the tragedy was a "qualitatively different phase in the struggle of working people and the working class," highlighting the growing divide between the economic elite and marginalised miners. The event served as a stark reminder that informal miners, often criminalised and dismissed, are victims of broader systemic failures.

David van Wyk from the Benchmarks Foundation in his analysis, traced the historical and economic shifts that have led to the proliferation of informal mining. "The mining industry," he observed, "has always thrived on cheap labour. The formalisation of this sector has been resisted precisely because someone benefits from keeping these miners in a precarious position."

## Artisanal mining: criminalisation versus formalisation

One of the recurring themes of the Forum discussion was the need to shift the narrative around ASM from one of criminality to one of socio-economic necessity. Geologist and artisanal and small-scale mining specialist Kgothatso Nhlengatwa emphasised the distinction between "Zama-Zama" mining – often depicted as invasive and lawless – and community-based artisanal mining, which, if properly formalised, could offer a sustainable livelihood for thousands. She noted that "40% of the workforce in this sector are women," bringing a gendered lens to the discussion and reinforcing the argument that ASM is not a marginal issue but a critical aspect of community survival.

The panelists collectively argued for partial formalisation as a means to integrate ASM into the mainstream economy while addressing health, safety and environmental concerns. "We cannot talk about development while excluding those who are already in the industry," Rutledge stressed. The current approach of state repression, he argued, does not address the root causes of informal mining but rather exacerbates tensions between miners and authorities.

## Environmental concerns and the question of mercury use

A major environmental concern discussed was the use of mercury in artisanal gold mining. Nhlengatwa, drawing from her work on mercury emissions, explained that small-scale gold mining remains the primary contributor to mercury pollution in South Africa. "We are trying to establish a baseline of mercury use in the country," she noted, "but the lack of formal oversight makes it difficult to track and mitigate its effects."

Van Wyk further highlighted the link between ASM and broader environmental issues, questioning why the government continues to issue new fracking licences while failing to rehabilitate abandoned mines. "There is potential for using mine infrastructure for alternative energy solutions – geothermal energy, solar farms on mine wastelands – but the political will is simply not there," he said.

## The role of the state and the political economy of mining

The state's approach to ASM came under scrutiny, with panellists highlighting the economic imperatives that drive its resistance to opening up economic spaces for artisanal miners. Rutledge argued that the government's reluctance to recognise and support ASM is tied to economic protectionism. "The ANC and SAC's economic strategy is rooted in exclusion," he stated, "and this extends to how mining rights and resources are controlled."

Van Wyk added that collusion between mining corporations and syndicates ensures that ASM remains an underground, informal economy that benefits a select few. "Someone wealthy is supplying mercury to these workers," he pointed out, suggesting that the informal sector is not as disconnected from elite interests as it is often portrayed.



## Mining towns and the future of ASM

The broader economic decline of mining towns like Stilfontein was also discussed. Van Wyk painted a bleak picture of these towns, where abandoned infrastructure and economic stagnation create conditions for exploitative labour practices. "If the government had any real interest in sustainable development, they would be investing in alternative economies for these areas, not just letting them rot," he argued.

The Forum also touched on how mining affects other industries, particularly fishing communities on the West Coast. "Ocean mining by companies like De Beers is destroying marine ecology and restricting fishermen's access," Van Wyk explained, warning that government policies continue to prioritise short-term extraction over long-term sustainability.

## Pathways forward: policy, organisation and activism

The forum concluded with a series of actionable recommendations:

- **Policy reform and infrastructure investment:** There was consensus on the need for government intervention to formalise ASM, including the provision of proper health, safety and environmental protections. Panellists called for abandoned mines to be repurposed for energy production and community development.
- **Challenging the narrative of criminality:** Activists and organisations were urged to push back against the depiction of artisanal miners as criminals. Instead, ASM should be framed as a labour rights issue and a legitimate economic activity.
- **Community mobilisation and organising:** Rutledge stressed that "the working class must free itself from economic inequality through mass mobilisation." The need for strong, democratic organisations that can advocate for miners' rights was emphasised.
- **Holding the government accountable:** There were calls for the state to take responsibility for tragedies like Stilfontein and to adopt a human rights-based approach to mining regulation.
- **Research and investigation:** Further research is necessary to identify the suppliers of mercury and to explore alternative technologies for safer mining practices.

## Conclusion: Towards a just mining future

The Forum provided a sobering yet hopeful examination of ASM in South Africa. It underscored the urgent need to rethink mining policies, not merely through the lens of economic growth, but with a focus on justice, sustainability and worker empowerment. "We cannot talk about transformation without centring the people who are actually doing the work," Rutledge said.

The lessons from Stilfontein are clear: South Africa must embrace a mining future that prioritises human dignity over profit, sustainability over short-term extraction, and inclusion over exclusion. The government's inadequate response to the disaster, as highlighted by LHR and Rutledge, reveals a profound disregard for the lives of artisanal miners. The SAHRC must step in to ensure accountability, and civil society must continue to demand systemic change.

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## Parliament joint committee meeting on Stilfontein disaster

The Stilfontein Mining Crisis was the subject of a rare, joint meeting of two Portfolio Committees in Parliament on 18 March 2025. The Parliamentary Monitoring Group (PMG) attended and has kindly allowed New Agenda to publish [the meeting summary](#). Altogether 26 MPs, responsible for overseeing executive actions in mining and policing attended, as well as Mr Senzo Mchunu, Minister of Police and Mr Gwede Mantashe, Minister of Mineral and Petroleum Resources.

A joint meeting between the Portfolio Committee on Mineral and Petroleum Resources and the Portfolio Committee on Police focused on issues related to illegal mining and derelict mines, particularly in light of operations conducted in Stilfontein, North West Province.

The South African Police Service (representing the National Joint Operational and Intelligence Structure) informed the committees about Operation Vala Umgodi, which had been launched to combat illegal mining activities. The Department of Mineral Resources and Energy presentations addressed mine rehabilitation and the case of illegal mining at Stilfontein.<sup>1</sup>

The police delegation emphasised the growing threat of illegal mining across multiple provinces and outlined the strategies in place to address it, including intelligence gathering, law enforcement measures, and legislative reforms. The presentation highlighted the extent of arrests of people and seizures of equipment, and outlined challenges faced in enforcing the law, such as heavily armed syndicates and undocumented immigrants involved in the activities. Concerns had been raised about human rights issues linked to police actions when handling illegal mining cases. The Minister of Police said that illegal mining operations themselves involved severe human rights abuses.

The Minister of Mineral and Petroleum Resources described illegal mining as a “criminal activity that must be eradicated by all means necessary”. Illegal mining had become a growing concern, particularly in areas like Stilfontein, where abandoned mines provided opportunities for unauthorised mining activities. Illegal mining posed severe risks, including environmental degradation, safety hazards, and socio-economic challenges such as crime and exploitation

The discussions revealed concerns over the effectiveness of law enforcement efforts, particularly in securing prosecutions, as the number of convictions remained low despite the high number of arrests. Members of the committees questioned the adequacy of existing legal frameworks and police resources, and asked about the role of private entities in either contributing to or combating illegal mining.

Police corruption was condemned, with at least one incident of officers allowing a key, arrested suspect to escape. Members called for stricter oversight and for holding mining companies accountable for failing to rehabilitate and secure abandoned mines. The involvement of foreign nationals in illegal mining raised broader questions about border security and immigration policies, prompting calls for interdepartmental collaboration.

Members asked what government’s plan was for the Stilfontein mine, given that as long as it remained rich in mineral deposits, it would continue to be a major target for illegal miners.

The way forward included a strong emphasis on multi-stakeholder cooperation between law enforcement, regulatory bodies, and local communities. The need for a dedicated police unit to handle illegal mining was highlighted, along with increased funding for operations and better coordination between the South African Police Service and the department responsible for mineral and petroleum resources.

Members called for regulatory reforms to close legal loopholes that allowed illegal mining to thrive. The discussion also acknowledged the socio-economic factors driving illegal mining and emphasised the importance of formalizing artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) to provide legal alternatives for those currently operating outside the law. The meeting concluded with commitments to address systemic challenges, ensure more effective law enforcement, and improve the rehabilitation of abandoned mines.

*The Parliamentary Monitoring Group is an information service, established in 1995, as a partnership between Black Sash, Human Rights Committee and Idasa, with the aim of providing a type of Hansard for the proceedings of the more than 50 South African Parliamentary Committees for these three advocacy organisations. This was because there is no official record publicly available of the committee proceedings - the engine room of Parliament - and this type of information is needed by social justice organisations to lobby the Parliament of South Africa on pieces of legislation, matters of democratic processes and parliamentary oversight of the executive.*

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> The Department of Mineral Resources and Energy formally separated on 1 April 2025 into two departments, one responsible for mineral and petroleum resources and one responsible for electricity and energy. The portfolio committees in Parliament – and the ministers and deputy ministers have been named to align with the new arrangements since the beginning of the Seventh Parliament following the national elections in 2024.