

A geographical perspective of corruption and natural resource crimes in Nigeria: Illegal mining, logging, and resource looting

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Abstract

Nigeria's abundant natural resources estimated as \$700 billion in untapped solid minerals, 37.5 billion barrels of petroleum, and roughly 20.4 million hectares of forest have instead become targets of systematic criminal exploitation rather than engines of development. Using an explanatory mixed-methods design that combines qualitative analysis of policy documents and institutional reports with quantitative data from NEITI, Global Forest Watch, and ACLED, this study examines illegal mining, resource looting, and illegal logging across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, identifying corruption as the central enabling factor behind all three. The findings show staggering losses from illegal mining and gold smuggling, from crude oil theft and pipeline sabotage, and forest lost yearly. Corruption operates through licensing fraud, trade misinvoicing, elite patronage, and non-enforcement of laws, fostering impunity among local criminal actors, and foreign actors notably Chinese operators active in all zones. Regionally, illegal mining concentrates in the North West and North Central, oil theft in the South South, and illegal logging in Cross River and Edo states. These crimes intersect with poverty, unemployment, and weak governance to form self-sustaining criminal economies. The paper recommends legal reform, geospatial surveillance, community engagement, ASM formalisation, among others, stressing that tackling institutionalised corruption is essential to any lasting solution.

Keywords: *Corruption, Illegal Mining, Resource Looting, Illegal Logging, Nigeria.*

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I. Introduction

The intersection of geography and corruption has created fertile conditions for illegal mining, illegal logging, and large-scale resource looting across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. These interconnected criminal activities are rapidly destabilizing the country's political economy, generating acute insecurity, and undermining the peaceful coexistence of communities. Corruption functions as the principal enabling mechanism behind all three offences, and identifying the geographical hotspots where they occur, as well as measuring their intensity and spatial distribution, is essential to formulating effective and sustainable countermeasures.

Nigeria holds an estimated \$700 billion in solid mineral wealth based on preliminary geoscientific surveys, petroleum reserves of 37.5 billion barrels as of January 2024, and approximately 20.4 million hectares of natural forest cover representing roughly 22% of the country's land area (NEITI, 2024; Nigerian Mining Cadastral Office, 2025; Global Forest Watch, 2025). Despite this extraordinary endowment, the country's mineral sector contributed only 0.72% of GDP in 2023, the oil sector routinely falls short of its OPEC production quota due to theft and sabotage, and the country loses between 350,000 and 400,000 hectares of forest annually, a rate that, if sustained, would see Nigeria's forests exhausted within three decades (Global Forest Watch, 2025; NEITI, 2024; Climate Scorecard, 2024).

The convergence of illegal mining, logging, and resource looting creates a self-reinforcing pattern that appears increasingly entrenched within the Nigerian context. Corruption is the common thread that weaves these three phenomena together. A diverse array of actors is implicated: organised crime groups and armed factions, corporations, and individual traders all exploit legal loopholes and weak regulatory oversight to conceal the origins

of extracted minerals. Bribery is routinely used to obtain mining concessions, evade legal consequences, or forge permits and official documentation (UNODC, 2025). At its core, corruption underpins the illegal exploitation of natural resources, generating cascading social and economic consequences including insecurity, communal violence, kidnappings, herder-farmer conflicts, and the mass displacement of populations from their ancestral homelands.

The illegal exploitation of natural resources by armed groups is a widespread and persistent phenomenon that spans continents and encompasses a diverse range of actors and resources, from insurgent armies and paramilitary factions to organised criminal networks. In sub-Saharan Africa, armed militias and transnational criminal networks are deeply embedded in the extraction of gold, diamonds, and timber, as well as the trafficking of wildlife products such as ivory and pangolin scales (Rodriguez and Caneppele, 2025). Nigeria is not an outlier in this regional pattern; rather, it exemplifies many of its worst features, compounded by a specific historical legacy of oil-dependency and institutional erosion.

This paper makes three primary contributions to the literature. First, it provides a systematic geographical mapping of all three crime categories across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, integrating spatial data with qualitative evidence in a manner that existing single-crime studies have not attempted. Second, it employs an explanatory mixed-methods design that moves beyond pure description to analyse the causal relationships between corruption, poverty, governance failure, and the intensity of natural resource crimes. Third, it synthesises the most current available data from 2024–2026, updating a body of literature that has often relied on older datasets.

The paper is structured as follows. It presents the methodology, provides conceptual definitions, examines the drivers and geographical distribution of illegal mining, analyses resource looting, focusing on crude oil theft, investigates illegal logging, presents a cross-cutting analysis of the role of corruption, sets out strategies for combating these crimes, and concludes in that order.

II. Methodology

This study adopts an explanatory mixed-methods research design (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), which combines qualitative content analysis with a systematic quantitative synthesis of secondary data. The mixed-methods approach is particularly appropriate for the subject matter because the geographical distribution and intensity of natural resource crimes in Nigeria is shaped by both quantifiable phenomena, measurable losses in barrels per day, hectares of forest, or billions of dollars in revenue, and complex qualitative dynamics such as institutional behaviour, corruption networks, and armed group governance. Neither method alone would capture the full explanatory picture.

The explanatory mixed-methods design was operationalised in two sequential phases. In Phase One, a systematic review of secondary literature was conducted to identify the principal drivers, actors, and geographical patterns associated with illegal mining, resource looting, and illegal logging in Nigeria. In Phase Two, quantitative data extracted from institutional databases and published reports were synthesised to generate time-series loss estimates, deforestation metrics, and violence indicators for each geopolitical zone. The qualitative findings were used to contextualise and explain the quantitative patterns, particularly in terms of the causal mechanisms linking governance quality to crime intensity.

The study draws on a multi-source secondary dataset. Institutional data sources include NEITI audit reports (2022–2024), Global Forest Watch tree cover loss data (2001–2025), ACLED conflict event data (2010–2023), the Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC), and reports from the Nigerian Mining Cadastral Office (2025). Academic and policy literature was sourced through Google Scholar, JSTOR, and institutional repositories, with priority given to peer-reviewed articles and grey literature published between 2019 and 2026. Sources were selected based on three criteria: (i) relevance to the specific crime categories under investigation; (ii) methodological credibility, assessed through the transparency of data collection and the standing of the publishing institution; and (iii) recency, with preference given to materials published after 2020.

Additional sources include reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2025), the World Bank (2025), Transparency International (2024), the Environmental Investigation Agency (2021), the World-Wide Fund for Nature (2024), ENACT Africa (2021), and the Institute for Security Studies Africa (ISS Africa, 2020). The Renewlyn Development Initiative report titled *Silent Conquest: The Chinese Infiltration of Nigeria's Solid Minerals Sector*, the NEITI-ANEEJ joint report on illicit financial flows in mining (2026), and the World Resources Institute (2024) also contribute key findings.

Qualitative data were generated through systematic content analysis of policy documents, institutional reports, investigative journalism pieces, academic articles, and civil society reports. A thematic coding framework was developed inductively from the literature, organised around four primary analytical categories: (i) the nature and scale of each crime type; (ii) the enabling role of corruption across crime categories; (iii) the geographical distribution and hotspot identification; and (iv) responses and countermeasures. Atlas.ti-style manual coding was applied to identify recurrent themes, actors, mechanisms, and geographical patterns within the documentary

evidence. Nvivo-compatible thematic matrices were developed to enable comparative analysis across the six geopolitical zones.

The quantitative component of this study involves the systematic compilation, cross-validation, and comparative analysis of numerical data on three primary indicators: financial losses attributable to each crime category, measured in US dollars and Nigerian naira; forest cover loss, measured in hectares per year and cumulative loss since 2001; and conflict events and casualties associated with illegal mining and resource contestation, drawn from the ACLED dataset. Where multiple estimates were available from different sources for the same indicator, a triangulation protocol was applied: estimates from at least two independent credible sources were required for a figure to be reported as definitive. Where divergences between estimates were significant, the range of estimates is reported and the sources and methodologies underpinning each are explained.

Spatial data on resource crime hotspots were derived from a synthesis of published maps, GIS-based analyses in the reviewed literature, and georeferenced incident data from ACLED and NEITI field reports. These were synthesised into the zonal typology presented in Table 1. Export route mapping (Table 2) was compiled from investigative reports, seizure records, and customs data documented in NEITI, Environmental Investigation Agency (2021), and ENACT Africa (2021) sources.

A distinctive analytical contribution of this paper is the treatment of corruption not merely as a contextual background condition but as a structured variable with identifiable forms, mechanisms, and zone-specific intensity. Drawing on the corruption typology developed from Transparency International (2024), the World Bank (2025), and de Sardan (1999), the paper identifies six forms of corruption including bribery, licensing fraud, elite sponsorship, revenue leakage, trade misinvoicing, and deliberate non-enforcement, and maps the prevalence of each form across the three crime categories and six geopolitical zones. This framework, presented in Table 3, provides the analytical spine of the cross-cutting analysis in Section 7.

This study is subject to several limitations inherent in the use of secondary data. First, significant underreporting is likely across all three crime categories, given the clandestine nature of the activities and the limited state presence in many hotspot areas. ACLED data, for example, are acknowledged by the platform itself to undercount violence in areas with restricted media access. Second, financial loss estimates vary considerably across sources, reflecting different methodological assumptions about the quantity and value of stolen resources. Third, the study does not include primary fieldwork, meaning that local community perspectives, which would be essential for a fully grounded analysis, are present only as mediated through the secondary literature. These limitations are acknowledged throughout the analysis, and their implications for interpretation are signposted where relevant. Despite these constraints, the multi-source triangulation approach adopted here substantially mitigates the risks associated with reliance on any single data source.

Conceptualisation

a. Natural Resources

The resources examined in this paper are natural resources, encompassing both minerals and forests, which are largely naturally occurring. The Oxford Encyclopedia (2008) defines natural resources as naturally occurring, untransformed substances extracted from the environment and used as inputs for economic activity, including both renewable and non-renewable resources that can be exploited without significant industrial processing. This encompasses Nigeria's solid minerals such as gold, lithium, tin, columbite, lead, zinc, fluorite, and others, both its hydrocarbon endowment, and its forest resources including tropical hardwoods.

b. Illegal Mining

Illegal mining refers to the extraction of minerals without legal authorisation, or in contravention of applicable environmental, safety, and labour regulations. It encompasses a wide spectrum of activity, ranging from large-scale, organised criminal operations to artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) conducted within regulatory grey zones. The NEITI-ANEEJ joint report (2026) identifies more than 70% of Nigeria's mining activity as dominated by artisanal and small-scale operators, the majority of whom operate outside any regulatory framework, without licences or traceability systems. Organised crime groups have increasingly embedded themselves in gold supply chains, drawn by the sector's high profitability and the rising value of gold (UNODC, 2025). Criminal groups frequently introduce illegally sourced gold into formal supply chains by exploiting weak oversight, inconsistent documentation, and regulatory loopholes along trade routes (UNODC, 2025).

c. Resource Looting

Resource looting refers to the broader, often state-linked or conflict-driven extraction and diversion of a country's natural wealth such as minerals, timber, and oil for private or criminal gain, frequently at the direct expense of local communities and national development. Corruption enables the theft of natural resources, leading to loss of public revenue and illicit financial flows, with fisheries, forestry, and gold mining among the most adversely affected sectors (World Bank, 2025; UNODC, 2025). Resource looting is not merely an economic crime; it systematically strips producing nations of the fiscal resources needed to fund public services and sustainable development. In Nigeria's specific context, the concept encompasses both the well-documented crude

oil theft and illegal artisanal refining concentrated in the Niger Delta, and the illicit contestation over solid minerals and land in other zones.

d. Illegal Logging

Illegal logging is the harvesting, processing, and trading of timber in violation of national and international laws. It inflicts severe damage on biodiversity, accelerates climate change, and deprives some of the world's most economically vulnerable states of critical revenue. Illegal logging accounts for an estimated 15 to 30 per cent of all timber produced globally, with the annual value of the trade in illegal wood estimated at between \$50 billion and \$150 billion, making it the world's third-largest transnational crime after counterfeiting and drug trafficking (WWF, 2024). Illegal logging and trade in timber constitute the most pervasive form of environmental crime by both value and volume, and the practice typically removes precious hardwoods from forest areas, lowering the barriers to subsequent deforestation and conversion to agriculture (WRI, 2024). Beyond economic losses, illegal logging drives deforestation, habitat destruction, species extinction, and contributes significantly to global warming (UNODC, 2025; WRI, 2024).

e. Armed Groups

Armed groups are non-state actors that possess the capacity to use violence and operate outside the legal framework of the state, seeking to undermine its monopoly over the legitimate use of force, including those engaged in criminal or hybrid forms of violence (Krause and Milliken, 2009). Research identifies four primary organisational patterns through which armed groups exploit natural resources: taxation systems, partnerships with state or private actors, outsourcing extraction to third parties, and direct involvement in production (Rodriguez and Caneppele, 2025). Taxation is the most common operational modality, whereby armed groups do not engage directly in resource extraction but generate revenue by imposing levies, fees, or tolls on those involved in supply chains such as miners, transporters, and traders in exchange for access, protection, or permission to operate (Van Uhm, 2020). Partnerships involve sustained collaborations between armed groups and state or private actors to facilitate the exploitation of natural resources; these are distinguished from taxation in that they imply a form of sustained cooperation or mutual benefit rather than unilateral revenue extraction (de Sardan, 1999). In the context of illegal mining in Zamfara, both modalities have been extensively documented, with politically connected elites sponsoring bandit groups in exchange for shares of mining proceeds (ISS Africa, 2020; ENACT Africa, 2021).

f. Corruption

Transparency International defines corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain, noting that it erodes trust, weakens democracy, hampers economic development, and exacerbates inequality, poverty, social division, and environmental crisis (Transparency International, 2024). The World Bank similarly defines corruption as the abuse of public office for private gain, a formulation that highlights the role of individual behaviour within institutional settings (World Bank, 2025). In the context of natural resource crimes, corruption operates as the primary enabler across all three crime categories: it drives resource looting through licensing fraud, revenue leakage, and weak oversight; it facilitates illegal mining through protection rackets, permit abuse, and smuggling networks; and it sustains illegal logging through timber laundering, deliberate undervaluation of harvests, and selective law enforcement. Ultimately, corruption reduces the cost and risk of breaking resource laws, thereby incentivising and perpetuating all three criminal activities.

Illegal Mining in Nigeria: Geographical Distribution and Drivers

Nigeria's illegal mining crisis represents one of the most acute governance and security failures in the country's resource management history. Despite possessing at least 44 commercially viable minerals, Nigeria's mining sector contributed only 0.72% of GDP, 0.28% of government revenue, and 0.75% of exports in 2023, a fraction of its potential and a direct consequence of the dominance of illegal and unregulated extraction (NEITI and ANEEJ, 2026; Kitco News, 2026). The country loses approximately \$9 billion annually to illegal mining and gold smuggling, according to estimates by the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI), while ECOWAS estimates that Nigeria loses 91 per cent of its potential mining revenue to illegal activity (Leadership, 2024; NEITI, 2024).

The crisis is driven by a convergence of poverty, official mismanagement, and pervasive corruption. Illegal mining has entrenched itself as a parallel economy across multiple states, frequently controlled by armed groups including bandits and criminal syndicates. The lack of comprehensive legislation has enabled illegal mining characterised by inefficient extraction techniques, unlawful trading of high-value minerals, severe ecological degradation, disease, and substantial loss of government revenue through smuggling creating an environment that has opened the door for both local and foreign organised criminals to exploit the illicit minerals trade nationwide (ISS Africa, 2020). More than 70% of Nigeria's mining activity is dominated by artisanal and small-scale operators without licences or traceability systems, enabling what NEITI describes as 'parallel economies' that exist entirely beyond state oversight (Ecofin Agency, 2026).

A synthesis of the geographical distribution of illegal mining, illegal logging, and resource looting across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones is presented in Table 1, while the primary export routes and border nodes through which illegally extracted resources are trafficked are detailed in Table 2.

Table 1: Illegal Mining, Illegal Logging, and Resource Looting in Nigeria by Geopolitical Zone

Zone	Key States Affected	Primary Crime	Key Documented Cases
North West	Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Kebbi	Illegal gold/lithium mining; arms-for-gold trade	80% illegal mining rate; 6,319 deaths in Zamfara (2010–2023); catastrophic lead poisoning (400+ children, 2010); Chinese nationals arrested in Bukkuyum (2020); gold smuggled via Niger and Togo to Dubai
North Central	Niger, Nasarawa, Kogi, Kwara, Plateau, FCT	Illegal lithium, tin, columbite, fluorite mining	River Chanchaga illegal gold panning; Jos Plateau tin/columbite; ₦60bn annual loss; arrests in Rafin-Gabas (2024); 4 Chinese nationals arrested in Karu (2024); 3,000 miners evacuated from Kogi; 40+ killed in Wase, Plateau (May 2024)
North East	Bauchi, Taraba, Adamawa	Illegal mining; illegal logging	Bauchi school dropout crisis (>50% fall in attendance); 143,000 ha forest loss in Taraba (2001–2023)
South West	Osun, Oyo, Ondo, Lagos	Illegal gold/lithium mining; sand mining; logging	Atakumosa East/West gold mining; 32 arrested in Kishi, Oyo (May 2024); ₦40bn annual loss; Osun community water/electricity crisis; Ondo forest reserve (45% primary cover lost 2002–2021); 32,881 illegal farmers in Ondo reserves
South South	Rivers, Delta, Cross River, Edo, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom	Oil theft; illegal refining; illegal logging; sand/titanium mining	1,784 illegal refineries destroyed (2022–2024); 589 oil spills (2024); 13.5 million barrels lost 2023–2024 (\$3.3bn); Cross River 134,000 ha forest lost; Edo 321,000 ha forest lost
South East	Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu	Illegal lead/zinc/coal mining	Ameke, Ebonyi — illegal lead-zinc mining; 8 Chinese nationals arraigned in Abia (2024–2025); Enugu coal largely informal; ₦45bn annual loss

Source: Authors' Compilation from the Literature, 2026

Table 2: Main Export Outlets (Ports and Border Nodes)

Outlet	Type	Resource/Significance
Lagos Port (Apapa/Tin Can)	Seaport	Tin, gold, processed ore, timber; primary exit for illegal minerals to China, Malaysia, Hong Kong
Port Harcourt Port	Seaport	Crude oil, minerals, processed ore; key node for resource looting
Sagamu (Ogun State)	Inland depot/staging	Timber consolidation points for South West and international export
Obollo-Afor (Enugu State)	Inland depot/hub	Major timber trading hub; cross-zonal collection point
Takum (Taraba State)	Cross-border hub	Entry point for Cameroon timber trafficked through Bissaula; onwards via Benue and Kogi
Mallam Fatori (Borno State)	Border crossing (NE)	Arms and resource smuggling crossroads; connects Lake Chad basin networks
Zamfara/Katsina corridors	Porous north-west border	Overland gold smuggling to Niger, then onward to Dubai via Libya/Algeria/Togo
Kebbi/Sokoto corridors	Porous north-west border	Secondary gold exit routes; arms-for-minerals networks

Source: Authors' Compilation from the Literature, 2026

North West Zone

The North West represents the most severely affected geopolitical zone in Nigeria (see Table 1), where illegal mining, armed banditry, and resource looting have coalesced into a full-blown security and governance crisis. Illegal and artisanal miners account for nearly 80% of all mining operations in the North West, with Zamfara State particularly affected (NEITI and ANEEJ, 2026; ISS Africa, 2020). Zamfara is endowed with vast gold, lithium, and copper belts, and the illicit economy thrives within a transnational supply chain extending through Chad, Niger, Libya, and Algeria. Illegal gold is routinely smuggled to Dubai through neighbouring Niger and Togo, while those who sponsor illegal mining also fund banditry and cattle rustling in affected communities (ISS Africa, 2020). According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, 1,615 banditry incidents and 4,201 deaths were recorded in Katsina and Zamfara states between 2010 and 2023, while an additional 6,319 killings attributable to banditry were recorded in Zamfara alone over the same period (ACLED, 2023).

NEITI-ANEEJ's joint 2026 report flagged 'a growing overlap between some Chinese-linked commercial interests and local conflicts' in the North West region, noting that illegal mining activity surged between 2022 and 2024 in areas affected by banditry and terrorism. The foreign dimension of this illicit trade is well-documented: in April 2020, the Nigeria Police Force in Zamfara State arrested two Chinese nationals for allegedly engaging in illegal mining in the Bukkuyum Local Government Area, where the federal government had imposed a ban on all mining activities (ENACT Africa, 2021). The Zamfara mining ban, initially imposed as a security intervention, was ultimately reversed in December 2024 when authorities determined that prohibition had not curtailed illegal activity and had, in some documented cases, strengthened criminal control over sites by removing legitimate operators from the field (Discovery Alert, 2026).

The environmental and public health consequences in the North West have been catastrophic. Beginning in 2010, artisanal gold mining in Zamfara caused widespread lead contamination resulting in the deaths of more than 400 children described as the worst outbreak of lead poisoning in modern history, with more than 17,000 people severely exposed (Tirima et al., 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2012). The region's child labour crisis further compounds these harms: children as young as six years old have been documented working in hazardous mining conditions across Zamfara, Nasarawa, and Kebbi states (Lawal et al., 2023).

North Central Zone

In the North Central zone, Jos in Plateau State (tin and columbite) and Niger State (gold) are significant hotspots (see Table 1). Illegal tin mining has proliferated across Plateau State, with thousands of abandoned pits scattered across both rural and urban areas. The Nigerian Mining Cadastral Office (2025) estimates that North Central states of Kogi, Nasarawa, and Kwara collectively lose approximately ₦60 billion annually in iron ore and tin to illegal extraction. Foreign involvement in this zone is extensively documented: three Chinese nationals and two Nigerians were arrested in Nasarawa State for illegally mining fluorite, zinc, lead, and tin in 2024 at Rafin-Gabas, Agwada, in Kokona Local Government Area; four Chinese nationals were arrested in Karu, Nasarawa State in April 2024, with tonnes of lithium seized; more than 3,000 illegal miners were evacuated from Kogi State by Mining Marshals to make way for legitimate operators; and in March 2025, several Chinese nationals and local collaborators were arrested at Jiasheng Nigeria Limited, a company operating without a mining licence found with a truck loaded with processed monazite (Nigerian Mining Cadastral Office, 2025). The human toll has been severe: gunmen killed more than 40 people in a raid on a mining community in Wase, Plateau State in May 2024. Conflict monitoring data records at least 33 violent incidents linked to illegal mining activity between January 2019 and April 2025, resulting in more than 218 confirmed deaths, figures that almost certainly undercount actual violence given reporting challenges in areas of limited state presence (Discovery Alert, 2026).

Illegally mined tin ore is typically mixed with legitimately purchased ore to disguise its origins, before being exported using falsified documentation via road networks from Jos to Lagos ports and onward to China, Hong Kong, and Malaysia. Trade misinvoicing, deliberate understating the value, volume, or grade of a mineral export is identified as the primary financial mechanism driving illicit flows from this zone (Discovery Alert, 2026; NEITI and ANEEJ, 2026).

South West Zone

The South West zone is characterised primarily by gold and lithium mining with Osun and Lagos (sand) states most prominently affected (see Table 1). The zone loses approximately ₦40 billion annually in gold and quartz to illegal mining, predominantly from Osun, Oyo, and Ogun states (Nigerian Mining Cadastre Office, 2025). Osun State has a gold-mining history dating to the 1950s, with the Ijesha land area well known for significant gold deposits, yet the bulk of activities remain in the hands of illegal miners. Foreign actors are implicated: 32 people including two Chinese nationals were arrested during a raid on a remote market in Kishi, Oyo State in May 2024 (PBS News, 2024). In Osun State, the once-thriving agricultural communities of Imosan, Itagunmodi, and Araromi now grapple with severe environmental degradation: rivers and streams have been contaminated, farmlands destroyed, and the community of Araromi has been without electricity for over 15 years as a result of mining-related infrastructure collapse (Lawal et al., 2023).

South South and South East Zones

All states in the South South zone are implicated in illegal petroleum extraction, while Edo State is additionally notable for illegal sand mining (see Table 1). The South East, particularly Ebonyi and Enugu states (see Table 1), is a significant zone for illegal extraction of lead and zinc, estimated to generate ₦45 billion in annual losses (Nigerian Mining Cadastre Office, 2025). Coal mining in Enugu State has a decades-long history of illegal and unregulated artisanal extraction. In the national enforcement drive of 2024–2025, eight Chinese nationals were arrested for operating illegally at Lokpaukwu community, Umuchieze, in Umunneochi Local Government Area of Abia State (Naanen, 2019; Dimkpa et al., 2023). In May 2025, four foreign nationals operating in Plateau State were sentenced to 20 years in prison with asset forfeiture described as a landmark but isolated enforcement milestone, characterised by governance watchdogs as an exception rather than evidence of systemic deterrence (Kitco News, 2026; Discovery Alert, 2026).

Key Supporting Factors for Illegal Mining

Several mutually reinforcing factors sustain illegal mining across Nigeria's geopolitical zones. Poverty, unemployment, and the absence of alternative livelihoods are foundational drivers, particularly in the North West and North Central zones (Lawal et al., 2023; ENACT Africa, 2021). Weak governance and enforcement constitute the second major driver: poor implementation of mining policies, inadequate regulatory capacity, and the persistent gap between legislation and practice allow illegal operations to flourish across virtually all zones (ISS Africa, 2020). High global commodity prices render informal mining lucrative despite risks, sustaining illicit activity even in the face of enforcement efforts (Dimkpa et al., 2023). Historical mining culture and low awareness of environmental risks are particularly significant in the North Central zone (ISS Africa, 2020). The rise of

industrial mining has also driven up local bribery payments, generating what has been described as a mining-driven 'local corruption curse' (Lawal et al., 2023). In Nasarawa State, the Pasali community has experienced extensive environmental degradation including water pollution from toxic chemicals, land degradation, deforestation, and air pollution from lithium extraction (AP News, 2024).

Resource Looting in Nigeria

Nigeria's oil sector accounts for approximately 82% of export earnings and 29% of government revenue, and it has been severely destabilised by systematic resource looting (Kitco News, 2026; NEITI, 2024). The scale of organised criminal activity associated with resource looting is staggering. Security operations conducted between August 2022 and November 2024 uncovered 702 illegal pipeline connection points, dismantled 1,784 illegal refineries comprising 3,063 facilities, and confiscated 1,743 wooden boats, 8 vessels, 117 vehicles, and 52 tanker trucks (NEITI, 2024). According to NEITI, Nigeria lost a total of 13.5 million barrels of crude oil worth \$3.3 billion to theft and pipeline sabotage between 2023 and 2024 (Business Post Nigeria, 2025). More broadly, between 2002 and 2025, an estimated 353 million barrels of crude oil were stolen from Nigeria's Niger Delta, a volume equivalent to approximately \$25.7 billion at current prices, or roughly 72% of the country's entire 2025 budget (Guardian, 2025; NUPRC, 2025).

However, significant enforcement gains have been recorded in recent years. The Nigerian Upstream Petroleum Regulatory Commission (NUPRC) cut crude oil theft from over 102,000 barrels per day in 2021 to 9,600 barrels per day as of September 2025 a more than 90% reduction through enhanced security collaboration, the introduction of the Upstream Measurement Regulation, the Advance Cargo Declaration Regulation, and the commissioning of metering audit initiatives (NUPRC, 2025; TV360 Nigeria, 2025). In 2024, Nigeria recorded at least 589 oil spills, of which 471 (80%) were attributed to sabotage and oil theft, underscoring the continued environmental severity of the problem even amid declining theft volumes (Nairametrics, 2025).

The South South Epicentre

The South-South geopolitical zone remains the epicentre of resource looting, with oil theft and illegal bunkering occurring both onshore and offshore across the Niger Delta (see Table 1). Resource looting in this context encompasses the theft of refined petroleum products, the operation of illegal artisanal refineries, and the systematic diversion of crude before it reaches metering points (Naanen, 2019; Dimkpa et al., 2023). The paradox is particularly stark: despite the oil sector contributing over 70% of Nigeria's foreign exchange earnings, host communities in the Niger Delta continue to endure endemic poverty and acute underdevelopment. The enormous wealth generated from petroleum extraction has largely failed to translate into improved living standards for the majority of Delta residents, creating fertile conditions for illicit resource exploitation (Babatunde et al., 2018). NNPC spent N267.98 billion on security-related pipeline protection within 16 months (2023 audit), averaging N16 billion per month, a figure that represents a significant diversion of resources that would otherwise be available for community development (Guardian, 2025).

Beyond the South South, resource looting encompasses violent contestation over natural resources such as land, water, and pastureland in the North Central states of Plateau, Nasarawa, and Benue, as well as illicit solid mineral mining across various geopolitical zones. The herder-farmer conflict, which has claimed thousands of lives and displaced hundreds of thousands of people across North Central and South West states, is rooted in large part in competition over natural resources exacerbated by environmental degradation and land scarcity (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2024).

Drivers of Resource Looting

Several interrelated factors drive resource looting in Nigeria. First, the operation of a rentier political economy and the so-called 'resource curse'. Nigeria's extreme dependence on oil rents has historically fostered elite predation, weak institutional accountability, and centralised but ineffective control over natural resources, conditions that incentivise theft and illegal extraction (Sachs and Warner, 1995; Watts, 2004; Idemudia, 2012). A deeply entrenched culture of corruption permeates from the highest levels of government down to local criminal operations. Elite and corporate collusion involving politicians, security personnel, government officials, and oil company staff significantly lowers the risks and costs associated with looting (Naanen, 2019; ENACT Africa, 2021; Dimkpa et al., 2023).

Second, poverty, underdevelopment, and the systematic exclusion of host communities in oil-producing areas drive what scholars' term 'social banditry' for illicit extraction as a form of resistance to perceived injustice and unresolved resource control grievances (Naanen, 2019; Babatunde et al., 2018). Third, inadequate infrastructure and poor pipeline security render theft operationally easy while making enforcement prohibitively costly. The combination of poor road networks, limited state presence in remote areas, and weak surveillance capacity along pipelines and at ports creates a governance vacuum that criminal actors readily exploit (Babatunde et al., 2018; Bodo et al., 2020). Fourth, elevated global oil prices serve as a powerful economic incentive, making

resource looting increasingly lucrative and fuelling the proliferation of sophisticated weaponry (Naanen, 2019; Dimkpa et al., 2023).

Illegal Logging in Nigeria

Illegal logging is widespread across most geopolitical zones of Nigeria (see Table 1), driven by the convergence of socio-economic hardship and deep-seated institutional weakness. According to the Nigerian Conservation Foundation, the country loses approximately 350,000 to 400,000 hectares of forest annually to illegal logging, agricultural expansion, and urban encroachment, a rate of approximately 3.5% per year that would, if sustained, exhaust Nigeria's remaining forest cover by 2052 (Climate Scorecard, 2024; NCF cited in Global Forest Watch, 2024). Available data confirm that Nigeria lost approximately 1.44 million hectares of tree cover between 2001 and 2024, with 253,000 hectares of natural forest lost in 2024 alone and 240,000 hectares in 2025, figures that portray an accelerating ecological crisis (Global Forest Watch, 2025). These losses generated an estimated 805 million metric tonnes of CO₂-equivalent emissions over the 2001–2024 period (Grokopedia, 2026).

Geographical Hotspots

Illegal logging is most pronounced in Cross River and Edo States (see Table 1), with Cross River hosting the largest remaining area of rainforest in the country, home to nearly 50% of Nigeria's remaining forest cover (NCF Nigeria, 2025; Socialscientia, 2025). In these critical ecosystems, loggers operate with near-impunity: the constant noise of roaring chainsaws and the movement of timber-laden trucks clearly shows that government authorities have lost effective administrative control over forest reserves (Guardian, 2025). The six most severely deforested states between 2001 and 2023 are Edo (321,000 ha), Taraba (143,000 ha), Cross River (134,000 ha), Ondo (130,000 ha), Ogun (104,000 ha), and Kwara (36,700 ha), together accounting for 868,000 hectares of forest loss over 22 years (Guardian, 2025; Global Forest Watch, 2024).

In the South West, the Akure-Ofosu Forest Reserve in Ondo State lost 45% of its primary forest cover between 2002 and 2021, with 32,881 farmers found to be illegally cultivating 57,758 hectares within Ondo State's fourteen forest reserves (Nigerian Mining Cadastre Office, 2025). Over the same period (2001–2023), Ondo State lost 130,000 hectares of tree cover and Ogun State lost 104,000 hectares, together accounting for 234,000 hectares of forest loss from the South West zone alone. Cross River State has an alarming deforestation rate: between 2008 and 2024, despite a formal ban on logging, the state witnessed unprecedented levels of forest destruction (NCF Nigeria, 2025).

The North East zone faces a different but related crisis (see Table 1). Taraba State alone lost 143,000 hectares of forest cover between 2001 and 2023, placing it among the six most severely deforested states in Nigeria. Illegally logged timber from Donga-Mantung in Cameroon is trafficked into Nigeria through Bissaula, offloaded at Takum in Taraba State, then reloaded onto trucks and transported through Benue and Kogi States to major commercial depots in Obollo-Afor (Enugu State) and Sagamu (Ogun State) before being exported internationally (ENACT Africa, 2021; Forest Trends, 2022).

Timber Supply Chain and International Dimensions

The supply chain of illegal logging in Nigeria involves multiple layers of complicity across local and international actors (see Table 2). At the base, local community leaders and timber merchants serve as middlemen, facilitating access to forest resources. These networks are then enabled by state officials who provide cover through corrupt practices, while international exporters, particularly Chinese businessmen drive large-scale exploitation. Indian and Lebanese companies are also implicated, acquiring rare hardwoods from local sources through payment-on-delivery arrangements mediated by smugglers acting as agents (Global Anti-Corruption Blog, 2021; Forest Trends, 2022). Nigeria is classified globally as a high-risk country for illegal logging, owing to the combination of systemic corruption, weak rule of law, and poor human development indicators (Sommer et al., 2021).

The primary destination markets for illegally logged Nigerian timber include (see Table 2): China, the dominant buyer for the furniture and luxury goods industry; India, a secondary purchaser of hardwoods; Vietnam, which serves as a re-export hub for Asian markets; and various European countries, where shipments are laundered through mis-declaration (Forest Trends, 2022; Environmental Investigation Agency, 2021). In one documented case, approximately 1.4 million illegally harvested logs from Nigeria, with an estimated market value of \$300 million, were laundered into China using irregularly acquired CITES permits, with more than \$1 million in bribes reportedly paid to Nigerian government officials (Environmental Investigation Agency, 2021). In Oyo State, loggers routinely bypass permitting requirements through collusion with 'street-level' forest officers, effectively granting de facto open access to protected forests (Global Anti-Corruption Blog, 2021).

Drivers of Illegal Logging

Poverty, unemployment, and livelihood dependency on forests are among the most critical socio-economic drivers of illegal logging, especially in the South East and South West zones of the country (Ikuomola

et al., 2015). Elevated timber prices and strong external demand from international actors provide powerful economic incentives that sustain illegal logging across all three southern zones (Global Anti-Corruption Blog, 2021; Forest Trends, 2022). A third major driver is the systemic failure of forestry law enforcement, manifesting in underfunded departments, inadequate staffing, and endemic 'street-level' corruption that enables illegal timber to be laundered as legal produce at checkpoints and ports of exit (Sommer et al., 2021; Chigonu et al., 2022). Structural policy failures including the state monopoly over forest ownership, poor inter-agency coordination, and the non-enforcement of logging bans create a governance vacuum that illegal operators readily exploit (Chigonu et al., 2022; Forest Trends, 2022). Agricultural encroachment by local communities, combined with population pressure, urbanisation, and infrastructure expansion, are common features driving deforestation across all geopolitical zones (Sommer et al., 2021).

Ecological and Humanitarian Consequences

Experts have linked extensive deforestation to worsening flood events in the south and the accelerating advance of desertification in the north, as vegetation loss disrupts hydrological cycles and destabilises soil structure (Nigeria Climate Watch, 2026). Forests that once regulated river flows and sustained groundwater levels are rapidly disappearing, contributing to sedimentation in major dams and intensifying surface runoff in urban areas. In northern states such as Borno, Yobe, and Katsina, expanding desertification is steadily reducing arable land, deepening food insecurity, and entrenching rural poverty.

The threat to biodiversity is particularly severe in Cross River State, whose forests support highly threatened species including the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee, the drill monkey, and the Cross River gorilla, as well as over 1,500 plant species among them 77 endangered medicinal plants (Guardian, 2025; NCF Nigeria, 2025). Gazetted forest reserves saw forest cover drop by over 33% between 2000 and 2016, highlighting systemic gaps in monitoring and compliance (Grokikipedia, 2026). In 2024, the 1.44-million-hectare loss since 2001 generated 805 million metric tonnes of CO₂-equivalent emissions, a significant and underappreciated contribution to Nigeria's greenhouse gas profile (Global Forest Watch, 2025).

Corruption as the Structural Enabler: A Cross-Cutting Analysis

This section synthesises the analytical framework introduced in Section 2.5, presenting a structured typological analysis of the specific mechanisms through which corruption enables each of the three crime categories, disaggregated by form and geopolitical zone. Table 3 maps the six identified forms of corruption against the three crime categories.

Table 3: Corruption Typology Across Natural Resource Crime Categories

Corruption Type	Illegal Mining	Resource Looting	Illegal Logging
Bribery	Mine permit officers; law enforcement	Pipeline inspection staff; terminal officers	Forest officers at checkpoints; permit issuers
Licensing Fraud	Fake/forged mining concessions; shell companies	Fraudulent oil lifting orders	False timber harvest permits
Elite Sponsorship	Politically connected sponsors in Zamfara/North West	Collusion of politicians with oil theft syndicates	Collusion of timber merchants with state forestry departments
Revenue Leakage	Royalty evasion; under-reporting of output	Crude oil theft from national accounts	Timber undervaluation at ports of exit
Trade Misinvoicing	Mineral grade/weight manipulation at export	Crude manifests falsified	CITES permit fraud; mis-declaration as legal timber
Non-enforcement	Mining ban reversed when enforcement not paired with reform	Selective prosecution; security collusion	Logging ban ignored in Cross River, Edo

Source: Authors' Compilation from the Literature, 2026

The analysis confirms that corruption is not a peripheral or incidental feature of natural resource crimes in Nigeria, it is their structural foundation. Several cross-cutting patterns emerge from Table 3 and the empirical evidence reviewed.

First, trade misinvoicing emerges as the single most financially significant form of corruption across all three crime categories. The NEITI-ANEEJ joint report (2026) identifies it as 'the primary financial mechanism driving illicit flows in Nigeria's mining sector,' and it functions equivalently in timber (through CITES permit fraud and mis-declaration at ports) and in oil (through falsified crude manifests and under-reporting of lifting volumes). Its prevalence reflects the degree to which corruption has penetrated the export infrastructure of customs, shipping agents, and port authority staff rather than being confined to extraction sites.

Second, elite sponsorship is the corruption mechanism that most directly links natural resource crimes to the Nigerian political economy. In Zamfara, illegal gold mining is explicitly sponsored by 'politically and economically connected elites' who use mining proceeds to procure weapons and finance banditry (ISS Africa, 2020; ENACT Africa, 2021). In the Niger Delta, elite and corporate collusion involving politicians, security agency personnel, and oil company staff has systematically undermined every effort to curb resource looting

(Naanen, 2019). In the forestry sector, Chinese and Lebanese timber operators maintain their access through sustained relationships with state-level forestry officials who provide 'cover' for operations (Global Anti-Corruption Blog, 2021). This pattern is consistent with the 'partnership' modality of armed group-resource exploitation identified by Rodriguez and Caneppele (2025).

Third, deliberate non-enforcement creates what ISS Africa (2020) aptly describes as 'low risk, high benefit' conditions that incentivise illegal resource extraction. The mining ban in Zamfara imposed and then reversed without accompanying structural reform illustrates this dynamic starkly: prohibition without parallel institutional change consolidates rather than disrupts illicit economies (Discovery Alert, 2026). Similarly, despite a formal logging ban in Cross River State, the state experienced unprecedented forest destruction between 2008 and 2024 (NCF Nigeria, 2025). The pattern is repeated in the oil sector, where the NNPC itself reported 9,000 infractions on the pipeline network in a single year, yet prosecutions remain rare (Vanguard, 2024).

Fourth, the involvement of foreign nationals predominantly Chinese, but also Indian and Lebanese in all three crime categories and across all six geopolitical zones signals a qualitative dimension of corruption that extends beyond domestic networks. The Renewlyn Development Initiative's report, *Silent Conquest*, documents how illegal operations by Chinese companies have converted farmlands, forests, and riverbeds into unregulated extraction sites, causing severe environmental degradation, escalating social tensions, and depriving the Nigerian government of substantial revenue. The NEITI-ANEEJ report (2026) notes that foreign companies frequently 'obscure ownership through shell firms registered under Nigerian law, using local proxies to access licences and permits,' enabling systematic trade misinvoicing and money laundering. This internationalisation of the corruption network makes domestic enforcement substantially more challenging and underscores the need for bilateral diplomatic engagement, particularly with China.

Fifth, the cumulative impact of corruption across all three sectors amounts to a compound governance failure that makes the aggregate cost far greater than the sum of its parts. When corruption drains mining revenue, reduces forestry royalties, and diverts oil proceeds simultaneously, the Nigerian state is systematically stripped of the fiscal resources needed to fund education, healthcare, and the law enforcement capacity required to address the crimes themselves. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle in which poverty drives illegal extraction, illegal extraction undermines governance, and weakened governance enables further illegal extraction and corruption.

Strategies for Combating Resource Looting, Illegal Mining, and Illegal Logging

The interlinked menaces of resource looting, illegal mining, and illegal logging require urgent and coordinated national attention, as they constitute root causes of the precarious insecurity and environmental degradation that manifests in killings, kidnapping for ransom, and a broad spectrum of criminal activity across the country. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted and strategically coherent approach grounded in the evidence reviewed. The following section examines strategies common to all three crimes before identifying measures specifically tailored to each.

Strategies Common to All Three Crime Categories

i. Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Enforcement Capacity

A foundational step in combating these resource crimes is the comprehensive strengthening of Nigeria's legal frameworks to explicitly criminalise illegal mining, logging, crude oil theft, and all related activities. Existing loopholes in mining and forestry legislation must be systematically sealed to ensure strict compliance and the effective prosecution of offenders. The establishment of specialised environmental courts or tribunals dedicated to handling resource crime cases would significantly improve judicial accountability and deterrence. The May 2025 conviction of four Chinese nationals in Plateau State sentenced to 20 years each with asset forfeiture demonstrates the deterrent impact of credible enforcement when the judicial system is willing and able to act (Kitco News, 2026; Discovery Alert, 2026).

Institutional capacity of key regulatory bodies such as the Federal Ministry of Solid Minerals Development, state forestry departments, and petroleum regulatory agencies must be strengthened through improved funding, training, logistics provision, and independent oversight mechanisms. The current enforcement apparatus is structurally undersized: an enforcement unit of under 3,000 Mining Marshals attempting to regulate an ASM sector that accounts for more than 70% of national mining activity, operating across conflict-affected terrain in multiple states, faces a capacity deficit that personnel numbers alone cannot bridge (Discovery Alert, 2026). Strict compliance with enacted legislation, including the Petroleum Industry Act (PIA) of 2021, which inaugurated over 90 Host Communities Development Trusts in the Niger Delta, must be rigorously enforced as evidence suggests it has contributed to measurable reductions in community-linked pipeline vandalism (NUPRC, 2025).

ii. Deployment of Geospatial Monitoring and Digital Surveillance Technologies

The strategic deployment of modern geospatial and digital surveillance technologies represents one of the most effective tools available for combating resource crimes. The use of satellite imagery, unmanned aerial vehicles, and machine learning-based monitoring systems can significantly improve the detection and tracking of

illegal mining, logging, and oil theft activities. A digitally enabled audit infrastructure for mining and forestry activities would reduce reliance on costly physical inspections while simultaneously improving accountability. The integration of artificial intelligence with advanced exploration and prospecting methods like gravity, magnetic, seismic, and electromagnetic techniques would further enhance surveillance capacity.

iii. Community Participation and Co-Monitoring

Empowering host communities through meaningful participation and co-monitoring is a critical and cost-effective strategy for combating resource crimes. Local communities should be actively engaged in the governance of natural resources through participatory monitoring systems and equitable benefit-sharing arrangements, particularly in the North West, South West, and South South zones. Community-based Forest governance models that incorporate local people in patrol operations, conservation decision-making, and benefit distribution have demonstrated considerable effectiveness in comparable African contexts. The implementation of PIA's Host Communities Development Trusts in the Niger Delta provides an instructive model: NUPRC reports that employment and empowerment through these projects have 'significantly reduced crude theft and infrastructure vandalism' (NUPRC, 2025).

iv. Alternative Livelihoods and Economic Diversification

A central dimension of any sustainable solution is addressing the socio-economic conditions that drive individuals into illegal resource extraction. Since poverty and unemployment are primary motivators, government interventions must prioritise economic diversification in resource-rich communities through the promotion of agriculture, support for small and medium enterprises, and targeted vocational skills development. For oil-impacted communities in the Niger Delta specifically, the urgent provision of sustainable alternative livelihoods and access to safe potable water remains an unmet priority (Naanen, 2019; Babatunde et al., 2018).

v. International Cooperation and Diplomatic Engagement

Given the demonstrably transnational character of illegal mining and resource looting involving Chinese, Lebanese, and Indian operators across all six geopolitical zones, Nigeria must actively seek international institutional support to strengthen domestic oversight capacity. Strategic partnerships with organisations such as the United Nations, EITI, and INTERPOL are essential for accessing resources, technical expertise, and internationally recognised governance frameworks. At the diplomatic level, Nigeria must engage China directly on accountability for its nationals implicated in illegal mining operations; the NEITI-ANEEJ report (2026) specifically flags 'a growing overlap between some Chinese-linked commercial interests and local conflicts' in the North West. Regional collaboration with neighbouring countries like Niger, Chad, Cameroon, Benin, and Togo is imperative for tracking illicit resource flows, enforcing trade regulations, and dismantling the transnational criminal networks that profit from Nigeria's natural resource crimes.

Strategies Specific to Curbing Illegal Mining

A pivotal reform is the formalisation and regularisation of artisanal and small-scale mining operations. The Nigerian government should establish clear and accessible licensing systems, provide targeted technical support, and enforce minimum safety and environmental standards for ASM operators, thereby integrating previously informal miners into the legitimate economy. Ghana and Burkina Faso have demonstrated that ASM formalisation can dramatically increase production: Burkina Faso's artisanal gold output rose from approximately 8.1 tonnes in 2024 to 42 tonnes in 2025 following dedicated regulatory reforms (Ecofin Agency, 2026). Nigeria's 'use it or lose it' policy which led to the revocation of 924 dormant mining licences in April 2024 provides a model for reducing speculative licensing and opening mineral-bearing land to serious investors (Reuters, 2024). Nigeria's Minerals and Mining Act should be modernised to strengthen regulatory oversight, incentivise local processing and value-addition, and entrench transparent beneficial ownership disclosure for all mining permit holders (NEITI and ANEEJ, 2026).

Strategies Specific to Curbing Illegal Logging

Combating illegal logging requires sustained investment in public awareness and environmental education targeting forest laws, ecosystem services, and the long-term costs of deforestation. The adoption of REDD+ mechanisms should be actively pursued; sustainable farming practices such as agroforestry, combined with economic incentive programmes for reforestation, can generate tangible economic benefits while reducing deforestation pressure. The Nigeria Forest Security Service (NFSS), established in 2021 with a mandate to deploy local hunters and rangers in patrolling forests, expanded nationally in 2024 but remains awaiting full legal approval to operate as a federal agency and is currently limited by a lack of funding and formal powers (rexclarkeadventures.com, 2025). Its full legalisation, funding, and national coordination should be treated as an urgent priority. The adoption of robust timber traceability and legality assurance systems incorporating both documentation standards and technological tracking tools is essential for shrinking the market space available to

illegal timber, particularly given the scale of CITES permit fraud documented in the trade with China (Environmental Investigation Agency, 2021).

III. Conclusion

The natural resource crimes of illegal mining, illegal logging, and resource looting collectively constitute one of the most serious threats to sustainable development and national security in Nigeria. This study, employing an explanatory mixed-methods design that combines qualitative thematic analysis with systematic quantitative data synthesis, has demonstrated that corruption remains the single most significant enabling factor behind these crimes, shaping both their spatial distribution and their intensity across different geopolitical zones.

The quantitative evidence is stark. Nigeria loses approximately \$9 billion annually to illegal mining and gold smuggling; lost 13.5 million barrels of crude oil worth \$3.3 billion to theft and sabotage in 2023–2024 alone (though recent enforcement gains have reduced daily theft by over 90% from 2021 peak levels); and is losing between 350,000 and 400,000 hectares of forest annually, a rate that portends ecological catastrophe within this generation. The qualitative analysis reveals that these losses are not accidental or structurally inevitable; they are the product of identifiable and interrelated institutional failures: licensing fraud, trade misinvoicing, elite sponsorship, non-enforcement, and the deliberate exploitation of governance gaps by transnational criminal networks.

The analysis reveals that while these crimes are widespread nationally, they exhibit distinct regional patterns. Illegal mining occurs across all six geopolitical zones but is particularly acute in Zamfara, Niger, Plateau, Osun, and Ebonyi States. Resource looting especially crude oil theft and illegal artisanal refining is predominantly concentrated in the South South, though the enforcement gains of 2022–2025 demonstrate that the problem is not intractable. Illegal logging is most prevalent in the forested southern zones, with Cross River and Edo as the most severely affected states.

The foreign dimension of these crimes is extensive and documented involving the Chinese, Lebanese, and Indian nationals in illegal mining, timber smuggling, and mineral laundering across all six geopolitical zones adds a layer of complexity that purely domestic enforcement cannot address. The internationalisation of Nigeria's natural resource crime economy demands a corresponding internationalisation of the response: sustained diplomatic engagement, bilateral accountability agreements, and multilateral cooperation frameworks that match the geographical scope of the criminal networks themselves.

The pathway out of these interconnected challenges demands comprehensive and sustained reforms combining stronger legal enforcement, institutional accountability, advanced technological monitoring, and inclusive socio-economic development strategies. Formalising ASM, strengthening forestry and petroleum governance, promoting genuine community participation through instruments such as the PIA's Host Communities Development Trusts, and investing decisively in alternative livelihoods are critical and non-negotiable steps. Above all, the paper underscores that no enforcement strategy, however technically sophisticated, can succeed without directly confronting and dismantling the corruption networks from street-level bribery to elite political sponsorship that keep the machinery of resource plunder operational in Nigeria.

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