

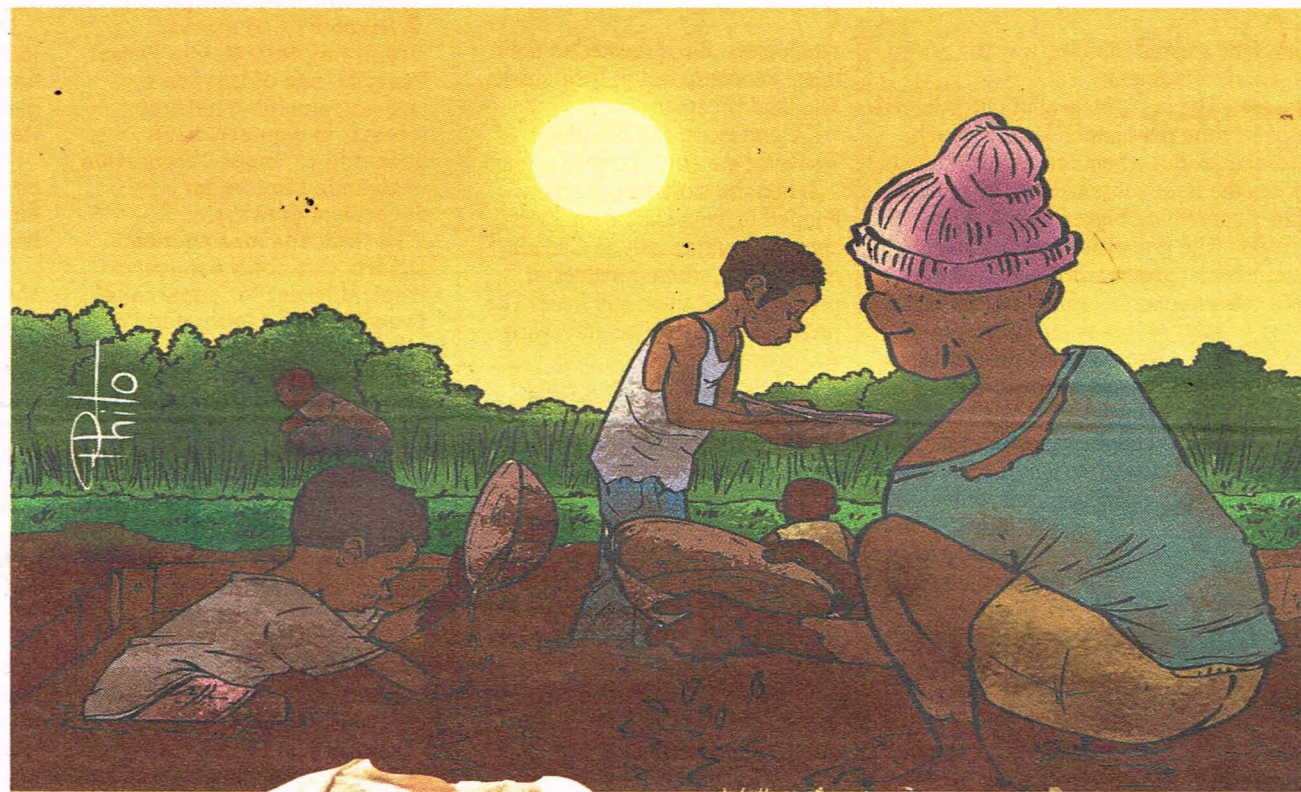
CHILDREN OF THE GOLD PITS: INSIDE

Deep in Namayingo and far from the confines of classrooms, children write their dreams with shiny beads of sweat, in the hope of uncovering precious gold. *New Vision's* undercover journalist unpacks the first story of a three-part series about the minors toiling to harvest the world's highly valued metal.

At dawn, before the first school bell rings in remote Namayingo district on the shores of Lake Victoria, another kind of workday is already underway. Here, children who should be tracing letters in exercise books instead bend over pools of murky water, their small hands sifting through thick, soft mud in search of gold. Some are barely 10 years old. What should be hours of learning are instead spent hunched over sieves and spades, chasing fragments of a mineral that has come to define both hope and hardship in the district carved from Bugiri District on July 1, 2010.

The promise of quick money pulls them in and holds them captive. As many as a quarter of school children have abandoned classrooms for mining sites, education is traded for a few thousand shillings a day, often not enough to guarantee a single meal. These mines are not officially regulated by the State and child labour is not controlled. Working conditions are extremely difficult and safety measures are non-existent. The children are involved in all the stages of the mining process, which is done entirely by hand, putting their health and sometimes their lives at risk.

This investigation begins in the fields strewn around Namayingo where the



promise of gold masks a harsher truth. Beneath the surface lies a hidden workforce of children, drawn in by poverty, pulled out of classrooms, and exposed to dangers far beyond their years. Their stories are rarely told in full: the long hours, the fragile earnings, the risks of pits collapsing and the toxic exposure to mining bi-products.

As we follow the trail of gold from these remote mining sites to the wider economy, we uncover a system that quietly depends on the labour of the youngest and most vulnerable. This is not just a story about survival; rather it is about the cost of neglect and the failure to protect a generation whose future is being traded, grain by grain, for the highly-exalted gold.

THE INVESTIGATION'S GENESIS

A *New Vision* undercover journalist travelled to Namayingo district to verify

and investigate child labour in artisanal small-scale mining sites for a week. She was able to locate and interact with the children working within mining sites, and discovered dire circumstances right under the authority's nose.

For years, the Busoga region has been known as a cradle for child labour mainly in the sugarcane sector. It is this sudden gold rush that captured



A child carrying gold ore, for processing, from one of the excavated pits in Budde gold site in Namayingo district

CHILDREN SLAVE AWAY AT NIGHT, IN THE WEE HOURS OF THE MORNING OR ON WEEKENDS WHEN THE AUTHORITIES ARE AWAY.

my imagination.

I picked interest after researching gold mining activities in Namayingo and reading several reports on the same issue, from different partners, about Namayingo being a hub for child labour in mines. What are the authorities doing?

It is more of a rhetoric question.

Despite efforts by district authorities, there are hardly permanent measures to stop children from engaging in mining activities.

According to a report from the United Nations International Children's

Emergency Fund (UNICEF), child labour in Uganda remains a persistent crisis, with an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 children working in artisanal mining every year.

Busoga being one of the regions in Uganda with high school dropouts, with the children abandoning education, seen as a lengthy venture, to chase quick money, I decided to verify facts on the ground, hence launching this investigation.

JOURNEY TO NAMAYINGO

Following lengthy discussions with my supervisors, I decided to travel to Namayingo district believed to be leading in child labour in Uganda according to authorities.

While interacting with some of the locals and authorities, they explained how the district is encompassed in a blanket of misery and abject poverty, with mining fields their only way out.

However, there are some children mired in poverty that are neither in school nor in mines. I was perplexed. "If the main reason is poverty, why are all the children who are not in mines, not in school? Why are parents not bothered to stop their children from going to hustle in gold mines? Why are children not benefiting from the Universal Primary Education Programme (UPE)? Why do schools chase these children even after showing interest in education?"

Trying to locate an active Civil Service Organisation (CSO) fighting for child labour rights in Namayingo is very difficult. Despite knee-jerk interventions led by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development to remove children from mines, there have not been concrete, hands-on actions to wipe out child labour completely.

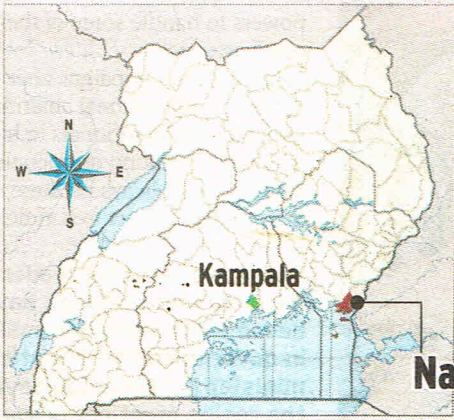
To by-pass the system and to my consternation, I found out that children slave away at night, in the wee hours of the morning or on weekends, when the authorities are away.

My source in Kampala,

NAMAYINGO'S DEADLY PROMISE OF WEALTH

GRAPHIC BY PHILLIP NSAMBA

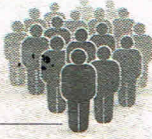
Location of Namayingo district



Namayingo

Population:

266,716



Distance from Kampala:

177km

Namayingo

CHILD LABOUR STATISTICS

Uganda is one of the African countries facing the highest number of children in artisanal and small-scale gold mining, with over 26 million child miners by 2025, according to the Uganda population growth pyramid. It is estimated that 10,000 to 15,000 children are engaged in artisanal and small-scale gold mining in Uganda every year.

According to International Labour Organisation (ILO), an estimate of one million children are currently working in artisanal and small-scale gold mines across the globe. They are facing numerous problems including dangerous working conditions, lack of education, poverty, early marriages, teenage pregnancies and involvement in child-to-child sexual intercourse.

ILO explains that child labour in gold mines remain a significant problem, classified as one of the worst forms of child labour, with the latest global total estimate being 152 million children; 64 million are girls and 88 million are boys. Children in forced labour (various sectors) clocks 4.3 million annually.

Artisanal and small-scale gold mining in Namayingo district can be traced back to 2018 when children used to help their parents to dry silver fish by the lake shores, while their fathers fished to earn a living. When the Government deployed the Army to fight illegal fishing, families became haunted by poverty and thus made a bee-line for gold mining work for survival.

Beneath the weight of poverty and the lure of gold's high value, many locals were drawn in. The promise of quick money attracted them and has held them captive. With a fertility rate of 7.8 children per woman in Namayingo district, as per the 2024 National Population Census, many households are sending their children to do hard labour for survival. Parents believe that if all members of the family, including the children, worked and pooled money together, they would get rich faster. Some individuals also started trafficking children from neighbouring districts to use them as cheap labour in the gold mines.



A child washing rocks at a gold mining site

the miners and the local community. However, I found many speaking the Samia language.

I was advised to board from the old taxi park in Kampala city. The commuter taxi drives straight to Namayingo town with stop overs in Bugiri and Busia towns. I still wanted to get facts right; prior to my travel date, I visited the park to speak casually with drivers who ply that route.

At the mention of Namayingo town, he lit up. A barrage of questions followed. "So, you go there often?" How long have you spent in the gold trade business? You look young, beautiful and moneyed..." he said, while looking at me in a ribald manner.

I maintained a blank and firm stare as he ranted on. He had a Muslim cap and touts kept address him as 'Haji'. He looked anywhere in his 50's, but with the verve of an adrenaline-infused teenager. After I made it clear that I would not be joining his harem anytime soon or in the afterlife, we talked "business".

In his estimation, it would be wise if I set off early in the morning. He advised that I leave with a 7 o'clock taxi to arrive early since I did not

know where I was going. That made sense.

Since it was my first time travelling to Namayingo, I agreed to leave with the first commuter taxi. By 6am on March 1, I was already in the old taxi park, set for take off.

While in the taxi, I observed other passengers. I expected to travel with oafish billionaires, the kind who portrayed quiet wealth, authority and confidence; those who walk like they own time and are not chasing it, those who talk in low, controlled tones and are ever on the phone taking care of "business" but never look disorganised...

Instead, it was the opposite. This particular taxi had casual travellers, nothing spectacular. Loud *TikTok* videos played at speaker volume, excitement about being in Kampala and worries about their livestock back home lingered in the vehicle. Primitivity, not high class, was evident.

I had earlier been informed that the pipes used on the gold mining sites are ferried from Kampala by taxis, but I could not see any sign. I had mixed feelings on what I would find there, especially the people, accommodation, how I would move from site to site without a trusted

person to accompany me and my escape route, in case I got suspected and attacked by the miners, still hang in the balance.

Fingers crossed and a brief prayer to God for journey mercies, we set off.

Being a Sunday morning, there were few traffic hold ups. We left the park at 8:10am and arrived in Namayingo at 11:40am. Throughout my journey, I never closed my eyes. I was curious to know how many districts we would cross to my final destination. After Jinja town, we passed Maga Maga town and branched off from a centre called Musiita before Iganga town, then Mayuge town, Bugiri and then Namayingo district.

The landscape from Mayuge to Bugiri is beautiful, with numerous artistic rocks. Upon arrival in Namayingo town, I expected to find a sleepy town centre but to my surprise, it is a big town bustling with economic activities...

who has been a local gold buyer in Namayingo, warns me:

"If you must visit the mines, you need to be careful. They are full of criminals and once they suspect you, you will be finished. You must leave

sites as early as 5pm," he cautioned.

This reminded me of the undercover investigation I did in the Mubende gold mines sometime back when my life was threatened.

This time, I have more

skills in how to handle similar situations because I have been involved in many riskier assignments than this. I was a little anxious, and I never expected a different language other than Luganda and Lusoga among

DON'T MISS PART TWO OF THE SERIES IN THE NEW VISION THIS MONDAY