Communicating about ASGM
Emerging trends, barriers, and recommendations

There is limited awareness of the benefits artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) can bring to local communities when it receives adequate support and fair access to markets. ASGM is often associated with environmental degradation, workers’ exploitation, unsafe practices and even conflict. However, the sector is also a source of employment and local economic development in some of the world’s most deprived areas, where few alternatives exist. Effective communications about these benefits can help provide a more balanced view.

While responsible operators have made strides towards demonstrating that ASGM can be a force for good, the sector’s negative impacts still dominate how it is perceived. This negative reputation blocks its potential: it weakens political support for suitable national policies and regulations, discourages investment, and limits miners’ access to finance. It undermines the interest of fair and responsible buyers and fosters hostility from other sectors and public opinion. Beyond the community of actors involved in supporting and sourcing from responsible artisanal and small-scale miners, few thoroughly understand the benefits the sector can bring to local communities.

This issue brief summarizes an analysis of the state of play in ASGM communications (including barriers to effective communication) and emerging trends, along with recommendations aimed at communicators and decision-makers. The objective is to encourage learning and take-up of strategic, inclusive communications practices that can help build greater support for the sector and recognize the many instances where the sector is contributing to sustainable development — while inspiring others to do the same.

The brief draws on an examination of the communications practices of 16 organizations and initiatives dedicated to supporting ASGM, and on interviews with communications professionals specializing in the sector, senior professionals with overall responsibility for communications in ASGM-supporting organizations, and stakeholders in the supply chain. The full list of individuals and organizations is available here.
A snapshot of communications in the ASGM sector

Communications are undervalued and under-resourced across the sector

Most organizations working in the ASGM space do not allocate sufficient resources to communications, particularly at the strategic level. In most cases, this is due to organizations not having sufficient financial resources. Communications strategies are not regularly included in proposals for donor funding, nor do donors tend to prioritize them. In other cases, the effectiveness of communications is limited by the reluctance of some organizations to disclose their impacts and results.

Sometimes budgets are allocated to specific communications outputs (for example, an infographic about a report or a website) which may not be aligned to an overarching, coordinated strategy for improving the sector’s reputation. In general, there seems to be a poor understanding of what strategic communications can deliver for the sector.

However, there are new promising developments. Recent initiatives such as the Delve database and campaigns such as the Golden Line, as well as the innovation ‘on a shoestring’ by communicators in the sector, are marking the beginning of a shift for the better.

ASGM communications requires significant time and resources

Communicating ASGM issues is difficult. There is a very low level of understanding of the sector, and an almost instinctive animosity towards it. Trying to turn these perceptions around is, as an interview described it, like “feeding a bottomless pit” that requires constant effort for often very little return.

In addition, accessing ASGM sites and gathering high quality communications content is complex, as well as potentially hazardous and very expensive. Few communicators have visited sites or spent time with mining communities. This is a major disadvantage, as it is a tall order to communicate effectively and compellingly about a reality not witnessed firsthand.
There is limited understanding of the needs and preferences of the full range of audiences across the ASGM supply chain

Achieving a good understanding of all actors across the gold supply chain is no easy feat. The range of players is very diverse: from mining communities, to buyers, refiners, manufactures, to retailers and consumers. Each group has specific needs, interests and preferences.

Tailoring communications to each group in the supply chain would require enormous amounts of time and resources. Organizations generally lack the means to achieve this, and sufficient knowledge of and access to these audiences. Pooling knowledge and materials through collaboration and coordination could yield more efficient and effective outcomes.

Storytelling approaches are the best performing communications products

Insights into the lives and perspectives of miners and multimedia materials explaining ASGM production processes make the most popular communications products in the sector. There is also evidence that multimedia ‘long form’ stories and articles perform better than reports, particularly if they include interactive, highly visual elements. The organizations that have spent time getting to know their audiences and tailoring communications based on their interests and preferences have developed some of the most effective tools in the sector. A good example is Fairtrade Gold’s materials for buyers.

Social media platforms also provide useful channels for ASGM messages. Many practitioners and experts use Twitter to exercise thought leadership and share live updates from projects and events with other practitioners, governments and miners. Instagram is mostly used to reach jewelers and consumers. (For example, see Pact’s Mines to Markets program Instagram channel.)

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Buyers and manufacturers often find the ASM sector confusing

Supply chain actors can at times be overwhelmed by the diversity of initiatives and organizations working on ASM, and not always able to keep up with new projects. Simpler, fact and results-focused information, country-specific where possible, would help them communicate about ASGM with their respective audiences.

The content and style of communications about ASGM can be heavy on development and technical jargon, or at times too general. Some other times they can be too abstract, overly aspirational, or lacking sufficient data or examples of impacts.
Continued outreach to media does not guarantee positive coverage of ASGM

Feedback from organizations and a scan of a year’s worth of media coverage show that reporting on the positive aspects of ASGM is hard to achieve. Long-term relationships with journalists can help achieve better results. But these are difficult to build when organizations rely on limited and time-bound budgets and there is little support for an ongoing, more institutional ASGM communications function beyond specific programs or projects.

In addition, there has not always been sufficient data about the sector or documented impacts that can be used by communicators to challenge negative perceptions and offer alternative stories to journalists.

A media scan of coverage of artisanal and small-scale mining (limited to English, French and Spanish language online press) showed that the top ASM topics covered are: its negative impacts on the environment, the Democratic Republic of Congo, child labor, and corporate perspectives on ASM (for example, when a major company makes an announcement or statement about ASM).

Knowledge sharing among ASGM communicators would be welcome

There are not many opportunities for collaboration on communications across the sector. The organizations surveyed welcomed planetGOLD’s initiative to look at communications more strategically and create a product that can help practitioners learn from existing practices and experiences.

Improving the reputation of the ASGM and broader ASM sector will benefit all involved in the supply chain, from miners to consumers. However, most communications initiatives are designed and delivered by individual organizations, with limited to no coordination with peers in the sector.

Teams working on planetGOLD projects in Peru and Colombia visited Ecuador in January 2020 to discuss regional strategies to make the role of women in mining more visible
Recommendations

For communications professionals working in the ASGM sector:

▸ Understanding audiences and tailoring communications to their needs and preferences is key

It is essential to avoid assuming that audiences across the supply chain understand the ASM sector, even its most basic aspects. Most people hold on to a perception, a belief, or an image, not necessarily to what is meant to be highlighted. Get to know your target audiences as much as you can and use these insights to plan and execute your communications. If you do not have direct access to some of your audiences, seek insights through colleagues who do.

▸ Define your voice and the way in which you will portray miners and communities

Decide and explain your vision for the sector and how your work will contribute to it. Use this to inform how communications materials will be created, whether visual, written, or multimedia. Take a stance about how you will portray miners and communities and stick to it in all content, be it text, photos or videos. For example, if your written text talks about professionalizing the sector, your photography should not focus on poor practices. Coherence and consistency are essential.

Choose to emphasize the agency of miners and communities, staying clear of images that highlight poverty, dire need, or poor ASM practices. Investing in professional photography and video pays, but provide a very precise brief to avoid results that do not stick to your chosen voice.

▸ Embrace the complexity with creativity and aplomb

Communicators usually strive to keep messages simple. While this is undoubtedly important, simple does not have to equal simplistic. One of the main communications challenges in the sector is the fact that most audiences outside the ASGM community are either “pro” or “anti” ASM, each caught in its respective echo chamber.

Shifting the “anti” camp towards greater openness to the sector will require introducing the complexity of the sector in manageable ways. We cannot shy away from complexity, but instead need to find creative ways to pull it apart and introduce it gently and compellingly, as if guiding audiences through a journey of discovery. Learn from Fairtrade Gold’s course for sales staff. They provide a significant amount of information, but in a way that is digestible to non-expert audiences.
For leaders of ASGM-focused organizations, program managers and donors:

- **Work in a multi-disciplinary way and include communications in the mix**
  
  “How we work is as important as what we produce,” said one interviewee. Avoid seeing communications as a final step in the production cycle. Instead, embrace a multi-disciplinary approach that gives strategic communications equal billing to other types of technical expertise. The low value placed on communications has cost the sector dearly. Embrace the opportunity to do things differently, and share experiences and practices with other communicators in the sector.

- **Support your organization's communications function**
  
  CEOs and program managers should provide adequate resources to communications teams, given the reputational challenge that faces the sector, and include communications as a core part of the budget. Donors should require that communications strategies and approaches are included in proposals as a key program or project activity.

Written by Gabriela Flores, this issue brief was commissioned by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the executing agency responsible for the planetGOLD programme’s global communications. The analysis and findings presented are based on interviews with key individuals and organizations, and a review of past and current practices, approaches, and initiatives aiming to communicate ASGM issues in national and international contexts.