

Illegal Sand and Stone Mining in Rejosari, Gunung Kidul: The Erosion of Community Cohesion and Cultural Values Amid Livelihood Shifts

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to address a gap in literature by providing an in-depth analysis of the social and cultural dynamics of communities affected by illegal sand and stone mining in Gunung Kidul Regency. It focuses on shifts in livelihood patterns, cultural values, and adaptive mechanisms that emerge amid illegal mining activities. The central argument is that such practices foster social polarization, fragile economic dependence, and the erosion of community cohesion. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach, the research explores the everyday lives of affected residents. Data were gathered through participant observation and in-depth interviews with key informants, including community leaders, village heads, and residents either involved in or impacted by mining. Additional supporting data were obtained from document studies. The data analysis followed an interactive process consisting of data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The study reveals that illegal mining has transformed the community's economic structure from traditional agriculture to mining dependency, generating quick but unstable income. This shift has triggered social conflicts and polarization between pro- and anti-mining groups; undermining long-standing social cohesion rooted in cooperation. Furthermore, cultural values that emphasize respect for nature are increasingly eroded. Practically, the findings highlight that law enforcement alone is insufficient to address the issue. A comprehensive response should integrate local economic diversification, community empowerment, and the restoration of social cohesion.

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Introduction

Mining activities have long been recognized as one of the key pillars of the global economy, including in Indonesia, a country endowed with abundant natural resources. However, behind its economic contribution, this sector also harbors complex challenges, particularly the proliferation of illegal mining (Cadizza & Pratama, 2024; Murty & Yuningsih, 2017). Unlicensed practices not only constitute legal violations but also pose serious threats to environmental sustainability and community well-being (Widyastuty, 2024). Illegal mining operations often neglect safety and environmental standards, leading to extensive environmental degradation and substantial losses to the state (Nurfadila et al., 2024). Such damage includes water, soil, and air pollution, which directly threatens the quality of life of surrounding communities.

Specifically, sand and stone extraction has become one of the most common forms of illegal mining (Purwanta et al., 2021). High demand for construction materials has made sand and stone lucrative commodities, yet their exploitation is frequently conducted without adequate oversight (Da & Billon, 2022; Gupta, 2024). Uncontrolled excavation alters the landscape, accelerates erosion, and depletes fertile soil layers, thereby undermining the local agricultural sector (Prasetyo et al., 2025). These impacts directly affect the social and economic conditions of communities whose livelihoods depend on natural resources. Consequently, it is essential to examine in depth how the social dynamics of affected communities shift as a result of illegal sand and stone mining activities.

The rising demand for construction materials in Gunung Kidul has intensified the prevalence of illegal sand and stone mining. The region's karst- and sand-dominated topography provides significant potential for extraction, yet it is often exploited irresponsibly. As a result, large tracts of farmland and water sources have been damaged, triggering conflicts between residents who support and oppose mining. Limited access to information and weak legal protection make local communities particularly vulnerable to exploitation by irresponsible actors.

As Pambudi (2020) explains, the impacts of mining extend across multiple dimensions of life in Gunung Kidul Regency. Beyond environmental damage, social consequences such as shifts in livelihood, the fragmentation of social relations, and emerging health concerns are unavoidable. Illegal miners often local residents themselves also face significant risks, working without safety standards or adequate social security. This situation illustrates the complexity of the issue, which must be examined not only through legal perspectives but also through broader social, cultural, and economic lenses.

To capture this complexity, the present study employs an ethnographic approach. This method enables the researcher to engage directly with communities, observe their

everyday lives, and uncover the meanings behind their practices and experiences of change (Reeves et al., 2008). Ethnography provides the means to explore perceptions, lived experiences, and adaptive strategies developed by communities in response to illegal sand and stone mining. This approach is particularly relevant because it highlights not only physical or economic impacts but also deeper social dynamics, such as the transformation of cultural values, traditions, and social structures over time.

Previous research has primarily examined the impacts of illegal mining from environmental and legal perspectives, but few have offered in-depth analyses of the social and cultural dynamics at the community level. For instance, studies by Capparelli et al. (2021), Duncan (2020) and Yeboah (2025) highlight environmental degradation and water pollution as outcomes of illegal mining, while works by Nurfadila et al., (2024) D. A. Rahmawati et al. (2025) and Rohman et al. (2024) emphasize weaknesses in regulatory enforcement. However, these studies have not fully captured how social conflicts emerge, how communities organize themselves, or how they respond to significant livelihood transformations.

This research therefore seeks to address these gaps by focusing on an ethnographic study of communities affected by illegal sand and stone mining in Gunung Kidul Regency. It aims to provide a comprehensive account of the ways in which social and cultural life has shifted under the pressures of illegal mining. The findings are expected to advance academic understanding of this issue and to serve as a basis for policymakers and stakeholders in designing more human-centered and sustainable interventions. Ultimately, this study not only contributes to the academic literature but also to efforts aimed at protecting the rights and well-being of vulnerable communities.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative approach through an ethnographic study. Ethnography was selected as the research design because it allows the researcher to immerse in and understand the culture, practices, and social dynamics of the community under study (Reeves et al., 2008). Through ethnography, the researcher aims to construct a holistic picture of how communities are affected by illegal mining activities, including the social, economic, and cultural changes they experience. The study focuses on the subjective experiences and narratives of informants to uncover deeper meanings within the observed phenomena.

The primary subjects of this study are local communities residing around illegal sand and stone mining areas in Gunung Kidul Regency. Sampling was conducted using purposive sampling, selecting individuals considered most knowledgeable and directly affected by mining activities. Key informants include community leaders, hamlet heads, and individuals with extensive understanding of mining dynamics in the region. In

addition, informants also encompass those directly or indirectly involved or impacted, such as illegal mine workers, farmers, and representatives from relevant institutions.

The researcher participated in the daily activities of the community to observe social interactions and economic dynamics, aiming to capture an authentic picture of their lives amidst the issue of mining. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected informants to elicit personal perspectives and narratives regarding the impacts of illegal mining. An interview guide was developed as an instrument to ensure relevant information was systematically captured. The researcher collected and analyzed documents such as media reports, regulations, and village archival data to provide broader contextual insights complementing primary data.

Results and Discussion

1. Changes in the Social and Economic Patterns of the Community

The social and economic dynamics of Rejosari Hamlet have undergone significant shifts following the introduction of illegal sand and stone mining activities. Economically, this activity has created new sources of livelihood that offer higher and faster daily earnings compared to traditional occupations such as farming. This phenomenon has attracted many residents, particularly young people who previously struggled to find employment, to shift to jobs as miners, truck drivers, or related laborers. These changes directly increased individual and household incomes, improved purchasing power, and altered consumption patterns. However, the new consumption patterns, which tend to be more consumptive, have also created household economic instability as they are not accompanied by saving or long-term investment strategies.

Behind this increase in income, however, lies a new and fragile form of economic dependency. The community's livelihood now heavily depends on the continuation of illegal mining operations. This condition makes them highly vulnerable to fluctuations in sand and stone market prices and to the risks of mine closures due to raids or law enforcement. Such dependency also threatens long-term economic sustainability, given that sand and stone are non-renewable natural resources. When reserves are depleted, the community will face a livelihood crisis without any planned economic transition. This situation exemplifies what economists describe as the "resource trap," wherein short-term reliance on natural commodities hinders communities from innovating and developing alternative economic sectors (Irham et al., 2024; Nasution, 2024).

Socially, these economic changes have triggered polarization and tensions within the community (L. Rahmawati & Gunawan, 2023). In-depth interviews revealed two clear groups: pro-mining groups who perceive mining as an economic solution, and anti-mining groups who oppose it due to its negative impacts on the environment, health, and agriculture. Harel et al. (2024) explain that such differences in perspectives often lead to interpersonal conflicts that undermine the long-standing social cohesion once rooted in

agricultural cooperation. Social bonds that were previously strengthened by mutual cooperation in farming are now eroded by competition and diverging economic interests. In addition to horizontal conflicts among residents, there is also the potential for vertical conflict between communities and government officials or law enforcement (Sunarto et al., 2024).

Moreover, these new economic dynamics have reshaped the village's social structure and power relations. Individuals or groups with capital or external connections enabling them to operate illegal mining activities often gain greater power and influence. They are able to control access to jobs and resources, thereby creating new forms of social inequality within the community. Those not involved in mining—particularly farmers—feel marginalized and struggle to voice their objections. This phenomenon resonates with conflict theory, which posits that competition over resources can generate divisions within society (Mawaddah & Hajar, 2024).

The effects of livelihood shifts are also evident in changes to migration and demographic patterns. Many young villagers who had previously migrated to urban areas now return to the village due to more promising job prospects in mining. This trend alters the age structure of the community and affects household socio-economic dynamics. On the other hand, it may also attract newcomers seeking employment in the mining sector, potentially causing friction with local residents over norms and customs. This return migration, while strengthening local labor availability, simultaneously increases the village's dependence on a single economic sector, which remains vulnerable to collapse should mining cease to operate (Rahman, 2023).

At a deeper level, these livelihood shifts affect not only the economy but also the psychological well-being of the community. Anti-mining residents often experience anxiety and a sense of powerlessness as their voices go unheard. Meanwhile, illegal miners work in unsafe conditions without adequate social or health protection, rendering them physically and mentally vulnerable. Psychological burdens such as stress, guilt, and inner conflict are particularly evident among youth who feel trapped between the economic needs of their families and an awareness of long-term environmental risks. Thus, the life dynamics of communities affected by illegal mining represent a multifaceted phenomenon requiring comprehensive analysis. Such analysis must involve interdisciplinary perspectives ranging from political economy and anthropology to social psychology so that the interventions designed can adequately address the complexity of the issue in a holistic manner.

2. Cultural Value Shifts and Community Adaptation

Illegal mining in Rejosari Hamlet has eroded cultural identity and the traditional values long upheld by the community. Land, once regarded as a sacred entity and honored through various rituals, is now perceived primarily as an economic commodity

to be exploited for financial gain. This shift has gradually transformed the community's worldview from one grounded in harmony with nature to one increasingly shaped by materialism and exploitation (Cahyana, 2018; Sihombing, 2019). It has also diminished the younger generation's interest in agriculture, which for generations served as the community's primary identity, as they now perceive it as an economically unpromising livelihood (Nawawi et al., 2022).

These changing values have significantly affected social dynamics and the tradition of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), once a defining feature of the community. The spirit of togetherness that used to thrive in agricultural activities and village development has weakened with the rise of a more individualistic mining economy (Yuwana et al., 2012). Social relations have increasingly shifted from kinship-based ties to connections shaped by economic interests, producing visible social fragmentation. As a result, the community finds it difficult to unite and take collective action in addressing problems arising from mining activities.

Despite these challenges, the people of Rejosari have demonstrated diverse and creative adaptive mechanisms. In response to environmental degradation, some residents, either individually or in small groups, have initiated conservation movements such as replanting trees on critical lands and constructing infiltration wells. These initiatives reflect a growing sense of collective awareness within the community, representing a form of resistance against the negative impacts of mining (Asrawijaya, 2020; Fitri & Akbar, 2017). Nevertheless, such efforts often remain limited in scale, insufficient to comprehensively address environmental damage.

In addition to environmental adaptation, social adaptation is also evident through informal conflict management efforts. Community leaders, such as neighborhood heads or village elders, play pivotal roles as mediators to ease tensions between pro- and anti-mining groups. This role reflects the community's strong desire to maintain peace and stability, even amid fragmentation (Prasetya & Fahadayna, 2024). However, such mediation efforts are often reactive and lack sufficient structural strength to prevent larger conflicts in the future.

These shifts in values and adaptive mechanisms also carry profound psychological consequences for all community members. Feelings of uncertainty and anxiety have intensified, particularly among those whose livelihoods are threatened or who are continuously exposed to the adverse effects of mining. At the same time, those directly engaged in mining experience anxiety regarding the risks of closure and the dangers inherent in their work. This condition underscores that collective well-being is shaped not only by economic factors but also by how the community interprets and responds to change culturally and socially (Maulana et al., 2025; Sembiring, 2018).

Moreover, this dynamic has fundamentally eroded local identity and blurred collective memory. The drastic transformation of the landscape caused by extensive excavation has not only degraded the physical environment but also erased the historical traces and narratives once embedded in it. Lands that previously embodied cultural traditions and historical events have been replaced by barren mining pits. Consequently, younger generations lose their connection to history and cultural roots, making this cultural value shift one of the most critical yet often overlooked consequences of illegal mining.

Overall, this analysis highlights the complexity of illegal mining's impacts that extend beyond physical and economic destruction. The cultural value shifts and diverse community adaptation strategies demonstrate that the social and cultural foundations binding the community together are being eroded. These impacts create multidimensional challenges that cannot be resolved merely through technical or economic solutions, but instead require deep engagement with the ongoing social, cultural, and psychological dynamics of the community.

3. Future Prospects and Challenges of the Affected Community

The analysis of community dynamics in Rejosari Hamlet highlights major challenges that threaten the sustainability of their future livelihoods. The foremost challenge is acute economic vulnerability, wherein dependence on illegal mining has created a fragile and unsustainable "bubble economy" (Wulandari & Sisdiyanto, 2025; Xiang et al., 2021). Once mineral resources are depleted or law enforcement intensifies, the community will face the risk of severe livelihood crises, potentially leading to mass unemployment and rising poverty rates. This condition demands comprehensive interventions to prevent total economic collapse.

Beyond economic vulnerability, Rejosari Hamlet also faces massive and persistent environmental impacts resulting from illegal mining activities. These damages are not temporary but will continue to exert negative effects for years, possibly even across generations. Land erosion, declining water quality, and ecosystem degradation threaten the very foundations of community life, such as agriculture and access to clean water (Dehkordi et al., 2024). Without serious and sustained rehabilitation efforts, the community will continue to bear the externalized costs of irresponsible practices, further degrading the environment on which their livelihoods depend.

Another challenge lies in restoring the social cohesion that has been fractured by conflicts and polarization triggered by mining. Divisions among residents will not disappear on their own, thus requiring deliberate efforts to rebuild trust and solidarity (Hariansyah et al., 2024). Dialogue, mediation, and communal activities unrelated to mining are essential steps toward repairing broken social relations. Such efforts must

involve strong commitments from all parties, including government actors and community leaders, to address the root causes of division at a deeper level.

To confront these challenges, local economic diversification emerges as a highly strategic solution. Government and stakeholders should focus on developing alternative, more sustainable sectors such as nature-based tourism and organic farming. By providing training and mentoring, communities can acquire new skills that do not depend on mining and foster more stable income sources (Asdan et al., 2023; Mukmin, 2025). This step will effectively reduce dependence on extractive industries while opening new economic opportunities for residents.

In addition to economic diversification, community empowerment through education and training also plays a pivotal role. Residents must be equipped with a deeper understanding of the long-term risks associated with illegal mining, as well as the various livelihood alternatives available (Mukaromah et al., 2024). Such education should include improving legal and environmental literacy, enabling them to better advocate for their rights. These efforts must involve all segments of society—including both pro- and anti-mining groups—to ensure solutions that are inclusive and broadly accepted.

Overall, the future of Rejosari Hamlet largely depends on how government and community actors collectively confront these challenges with comprehensive and sustainable approaches. Without planned and participatory solutions, the community will remain trapped in cycles of vulnerability and socio-economic uncertainty. A just and well-prepared transition is required, moving away from illegal mining toward a more sustainable economy that balances social, economic, and environmental well-being.

This study underscores the urgency of proactive action, not merely reactive responses, with strategies oriented toward long-term development. The central recommendation is for the government and the people of Rejosari Hamlet to collaborate in creating a development model that prioritizes sustainability and equity. Such a transition is not only about replacing livelihoods but also about rehabilitating the damaged environment and rebuilding strong social structures. With shared commitment, Rejosari Hamlet holds the potential to overcome its dependency on mining and build a brighter and more stable future.

Conclusion

Based on an in-depth ethnographic study of community life in Rejosari Hamlet, this research concludes that illegal sand and stone mining constitute a complex and destructive social phenomenon rather than merely an environmental or legal issue. The main findings reveal significant shifts in social and economic patterns, as residents moved from traditional livelihoods to a fragile mining sector. This transition created vulnerable economic dependence and triggered polarization and conflict within the community. Furthermore, cultural values that once emphasized respect for nature have eroded,

replaced by perceptions of land as a commodity, although some segments of the community exhibit partial adaptive efforts to mitigate ongoing damage.

The study yields three principal contributions. Firstly, the empirical contribution offers an in-depth, ground-level portrait of a resource-affected community, detailing the shift from a sustainable agricultural base to a fragile, vulnerable mining dependency. It meticulously maps the resulting social polarization and conflict between pro- and anti-mining factions, providing direct evidence of community fragmentation. Secondly, the theoretical contribution significantly advances the understanding of key social concepts within the context of resource extraction. Specifically, it demonstrates the rapid erosion of community cohesion (*gotong royong*) when traditional social bonds are replaced by competitive, profit-driven economic ties. It also illustrates how a forced livelihood shift directly triggers the cultural value shift from land as a sacred entity and community identity to land as a mere exploitable commodity. This process highlights the multifaceted dimension of the 'resource trap' beyond just economic metrics.

Thirdly, the findings carry critical operational implications for stakeholders, underscoring that law enforcement alone is insufficient. Effective intervention requires a multi-pronged package for restoration and transition. This package should include: (1) designing economic diversification programs based on local assets, such as developing nature-based tourism or organic farming to provide stable alternatives; (2) establishing a mediation platform based on customary or community leadership to actively rebuild broken trust and social cohesion ; and (3) implementing a participatory environmental rehabilitation protocol that involves all community segments in long-term ecosystem restoration. The study's primary limitation is its single-site focus on Rejosari Hamlet, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, future research should pursue three specific avenues: (1) a comparative study across different karst hamlets in Gunung Kidul with varying levels of mining activity; (2) a longitudinal analysis of community well-being following the successful closure of a mine site; and (3) an evaluation of the efficacy of existing economic diversification programs in reducing mining dependency. This research ultimately provides a new, holistic framework for addressing resource exploitation challenges that prioritizes sustainable development and human well-being over reactive measures.

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