

Tip Sheet: Tracing Illegal Mining Activities - Lessons from the Field

By Linda Mujuru

1. Groundwork and Community Networks

How to build trust, uncover hidden power structures, and centre affected communities

Sources & Access:

Most of my mining stories started with community-level sources, villagers, artisanal miners, women affected by pollution, and local leaders. I built trust by spending time in mining areas without a camera or notebook initially and listening to their concerns.

Local NGOs often introduced me to informal miners who are wary of outsiders.

Breakthrough Moment:

Realising that the informal power structures of local political actors, traditional leaders, and sometimes police were directly connected to illegal mining operations. This insight only emerged after repeated visits and off-record conversations.

Tip for Journalists:

Map out the human network before mapping the mining sites. Relationships will reveal more than official data. Always prioritise consent and protect community members who share sensitive information.

2. Gathering and Verifying Evidence

Combining digital tools with field verification for accuracy

Data and Documents Used:

I cross-referenced government mining permits (available through the Ministry of Mines), Environmental Management Agency (EMA) reports, and satellite images (from Google Earth and open-source tools like Sentinel Hub) to identify unauthorised mining activities.

Local environmental activists helped verify the locations by physically inspecting them.

Breakthrough:

Finding inconsistencies between official mining permits and what was happening on the ground particularly where operations extended into restricted zones or near rivers.

Toughest Challenge:

Getting access to government data was difficult. Persistence, polite follow-ups, and referencing the public's right to information helped. On-site verification was risky due to hostile miners; blending in and using local guides minimised attention.

Tip for Journalists:

Use a mix of digital sleuthing (maps, satellite tools, WhatsApp groups, Facebook mining pages) and ground truthing. Always double-check visual data with physical visits or trusted local confirmation.

3. Investigating Safely and Strategically

How to plan, protect, and assess risks before entering mining zones

Working Environment:

I often worked alone but coordinated with editors and security contacts before going into volatile mining zones. I shared my location via secure apps and checked in at scheduled times.

Security Measures:

Avoid travelling with visible recording equipment. Dress simply and don't identify as a journalist until trust is established. Use encrypted communication for sensitive interviews.

Recommendation:

Conduct a risk assessment before every trip. Know your exit routes, nearest safe houses, and local contacts. Never compromise safety for access. Build alliances with local reporters, health officers, or NGOs who already have community trust.

Final Thoughts

Investigating illegal mining isn't just about exposing wrongdoing, it's about understanding systems. The most powerful stories connect environmental degradation, power dynamics, and everyday lives. Trust, verification, and safety form the foundation of every successful investigation.