This paper reflects critically on how formalizing and intensifying support to artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) – low-tech, labour-intensive mineral processing and extraction – can help poor countries achieve targets set under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The analysis focuses on sub-Saharan Africa, where, despite proliferating mostly in informal “spaces,” ASM accounts for a sizable share of the region’s mineral production, and employs at least 15-20 million people directly and an additional 100 million individuals in the downstream and upstream industries it spawns. Failure to recognize the embeddedness of ASM in rural sub-Saharan Africa in the Millennium Development Project yielded a series of inappropriate policies and interventions aimed at alleviating poverty and facilitating economic growth. There was an opportunity, in the UNDP’s MAPPING MINING TO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: AN ATLAS, to legitimize ASM’s importance in not only sub-Saharan Africa but in the developing world more broadly. Significantly, the Atlas ‘focuses on large-scale mining’ because, its authors explain, “The scale of ASM warrants a separate guide and review to map the opportunities on how ASM can contribute to the SDGs.”

Drawing on a body of scholarship spanning three decades, including the authors’ own research in Ghana, Mali, Liberia, Zambia and Sierra Leone, the paper builds a case for greater inclusion of ASM in programs and policies implemented in sub-Saharan Africa under the auspices of the SDGs. In doing so, I will have laid a foundation for a separate atlas that legitimizes the sector’s importance. Surveying this literature, the analysis builds a case for formalizing and support ASM in the region by showing how it is engaging unemployed youth; sustaining agriculture by generating the finance needed to purchase crucial farm inputs; and has forged links with, and ultimately catalysed the growth of, local services industries. The paper seeks to mainstream the rather disparate debates on livelihoods and ASM in World Development and other leading development journals by anchoring it in the rhetoric and dialogue on the SDGs.