

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Conservation International/ Global Environment Facility (GEF)

\$180-million investment to tackle the hidden cost of gold

- *The artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) sector accounts for 20 per cent of the world's annual gold production*
- *As many as 15 million people work in the ASGM sector globally – including 4.5 million women and over 600,000 children*
- *The ASGM sector is the single largest source of man-made mercury emissions, responsible for the release of as much as 1,000 tonnes of mercury to the atmosphere annually*
- *New \$180-million [Global Environment Facility](#) programme will improve conditions for artisanal miners across eight countries while slashing harmful mercury emissions*

London, 18 February, 2019:

Urgent action is needed to protect millions of men, women and children exposed to toxic levels of mercury through gold production every year, according to the backers of a new \$180-million programme to reform the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASGM) sector.

“From smartphones to wedding rings, gold passes through all of our hands every day. But for most of us the source of that gold, and its real cost, remains a mystery,” Gustavo Fonseca, GEF Director of Programs, said.

“Introducing safe, mercury-free technologies into the ASGM sector will help provide a safe transition to job formality and dignified work for millions, while putting an end to the environmental impacts that can pave the way to sustainably produced gold.”

Every year, more than 2,700 tonnes of gold is mined around the world. Twenty per cent of that – over 500 tonnes annually – is produced by artisanal and small-scale miners. These miners and processors, the majority of them in developing countries, work in often harsh conditions, without the protection of industry regulations on pay, health or safety, to sate the global hunger for gold for jewellery, investment and consumer products.

With many miners relying on toxic, mercury-based extraction methods, the ASGM sector is also the world’s single largest source of man-made mercury emissions, releasing as much as 1,000 tonnes of mercury (almost 40 per cent of the global total) into the atmosphere every year.

Launched today at London’s [Goldsmiths’ Centre](#), the Global Environment Facility-backed Global Opportunities for the Long-term Development of the ASGM Sector (GEF GOLD) programme aims to reduce the use of mercury in artisanal gold mining and introduce and facilitate access to mercury-free extraction methods, while also working with governments to formalize the sector, promoting miners rights, safety and their access to markets.

Spanning eight countries the five-year programme is a partnership between the [Global Environment Facility](#), the [United Nations Development Programme](#), the [United Nations Environment Programme](#), the [United Nations Industrial Development Organization](#), [Conservation International](#) and the governments of Burkina Faso, Colombia, Guyana, Indonesia, Kenya, Mongolia, the Philippines and Peru.

“By phasing out mercury use and connecting miners to markets for responsibly produced and sourced minerals, GEF GOLD will help to ensure the gold value chain both supports miners and provides consumers with access to ethically produced, environmentally sustainable gold,” Jacob Duer, Head of the UN Environment Chemicals and Health branch said.

“Promoting and facilitating access to non-mercury processing techniques for artisanal and small-scale miners is vital – not only to reduce mercury emissions, but to protect the health of vulnerable communities.”

[Studies indicate](#) that mercury exposure in artisanal and small-scale miners is a major, largely neglected global health problem – putting miners and their communities at risk of impacts from permanent brain damage to seizures, vision and hearing loss, and delayed childhood development.

As many as 15 million people work in the ASGM sector globally – including 4.5 million women and over 600,000 children. While ASGM represents a development opportunity for rural populations, who often have few livelihood alternatives, miners operate on the edges of legality in many countries, with ASGM either banned outright or limited by legislation and licensing procedures designed primarily for large-scale operations.

By supporting the regulatory and policy reforms needed to formalize the work of artisanal and small-scale miners across the eight programme countries, GEF GOLD aims to secure miners’ livelihoods, through opening up the access to markets and finance needed to increase incomes and enable the uptake of mercury-free technology. By phasing out mercury use, the programme aims to achieve eventual mercury emission reductions of 369 tonnes, supporting countries’ commitments under the [Minamata Convention on Mercury](#) to reduce and, where feasible, eliminate mercury use in the sector.

Alongside working directly with artisanal and small-scale miners and national authorities, the GEF GOLD programme will work with the private sector across industries and partners including the [Better Gold Initiative](#), [Alliance for Responsible Mining](#) and [Fairtrade International](#) to promote compliance with international standards on responsible mineral supply chains.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Images available at: <https://bit.ly/2Gq3BoI>

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Additional quotes:

UN Environment:

“Mercury emissions impact health and ecosystems, contaminating the food we eat, the water we drink and the air we breathe. This is a long-term problem we need to confront now. Joint initiatives like GEF GOLD demonstrate that when we unite for environmental action we can protect community health, provide livelihoods to those most in need, and save the planet.”

Joyce Msuya, Acting Executive Director, UN Environment

UNDP:

“Transforming the extremely harmful practice using mercury in the artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASGM) is essential to protect human health and ecosystems. GEF GOLD is a flagship initiative designed to tackle the global concern on mercury emissions. About 1.14 million people are engaged in ASGM in Colombia, Indonesia, Kenya, and Peru. As part of GEF GOLD, UNDP will support the adoption of sound mining practices in these countries through strengthening institutions, policy and regulation framework, increasing the access to mercury-free technologies, disseminating best practices, rising awareness and sharing information. These packages of interventions will contribute to poverty alleviation, addressing inequality, and improving the health and livelihoods of vulnerable communities engaged in ASGM.”

Abdoulaye Mar Dieye, Assistant Secretary-General, Assistant Administrator and Director of the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, UNDP

UNIDO:

“The widespread use of mercury in the artisanal and small-scale sector affects the environment and people, particularly in developing countries. UNIDO is proud to be a part of the GEF GOLD programme, which supports innovative and viable solutions

focusing on formalization, access to markets and finances, mercury free technologies and awareness raising. UNIDO will be working in Burkina Faso, and jointly with UNEP in Mongolia and the Philippines, with the aim of providing sustainable livelihood for the miners and their communities.”

Philippe Scholtès, Managing Director of Programme Development and Technical Cooperation, UNIDO

Conservation International:

“Mercury is not necessary to mine and process gold. In the developed world, mercury has not been widely used in gold production for a century. By improving small-scale gold mining in the developing world, we can improve the health of people and preserve Nature that provides us so much. That means mining in the right places and in the right ways. It means professionalizing practices to not only protect human health and the environment, but to create better returns for mining communities. With the support of the Global Environment Facility, and in close consultation with the government, we are doing exactly this in Guyana.”

Dr. M. Sanjayan, CEO, Conservation International

About the Global Environment Facility

The Global Environment Facility was established on the eve of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit to help tackle our planet’s most pressing environmental problems. Since then, the GEF has provided over \$17.9 billion in grants and mobilized an additional \$93.2 billion in co-financing for more than 4500 projects in 170 countries. Today, the GEF is an international partnership of 183 countries, international institutions, civil society organizations and the private sector that addresses global environmental issues.