

Lithium, Land and the Green Transition's Forgotten Beneficiaries

By Tanatsiwa Dambuza

In Bikita and Buhera, families who have farmed the same land for generations are being displaced. Not because of drought or war, but because beneath their fields lies one of the most coveted minerals on the planet: lithium. It is the metal that powers the electric vehicles and the smartphones that you see every day. The metal that the world has decided is the key to a cleaner future, and whose extraction is making life considerably less clean for the communities sitting above it.

That future is being built on African land, at African cost. The Democratic Republic of Congo supplies the cobalt in the batteries powering the same electric vehicles and its mining communities have spent decades documenting a silent genocide of mass violence and exploitation including child labour, toxic contamination, and displacement with little restitution. Zimbabwe's lithium communities are living a variation of the same story. In Bikita and Buhera, fields have been replaced by machinery and No Entry signs are watching the profits leave by trucks, while they wait for the benefits they were promised.

Zimbabwe holds an estimated 480,000 metric tons of lithium reserves, the largest on the continent and fifth largest globally. Between 2021 and 2024, Chinese investment in the sector surpassed one billion United States dollars. In Bikita and Buhera, the green transition feels like something else entirely. Forty-one families from Buhera, Manicaland, were displaced without adequate consultations when owned by China's Sabi Star mining company began operations on land their grandparents had farmed. Compensation, promised in writing according to reports, arrived late, was disputed, unfair, inadequate. For some families, it never arrived at all. In Bikita, Masvingo Province, Chinese-backed operations expanded faster than any consultation process could keep pace with.

Ancestral Land, Broken Promises

In Bikita, several companies are accused of extracting before legally required Environmental Impact Assessments were completed. Women who had farmed independently for decades found themselves economically cornered; some offered wages as little as USD180 per month, and others not employed at all. Those who were not employed, predominantly older women and mothers of young children, lost their livelihoods with no alternative provided.

“They came at night with papers and police. They said we had to move for development. What development? The mine is there. The money goes somewhere else. We got nothing but promises written on paper that nobody ever kept.”

— Miriam Chikutu, 58, displaced farmer, Buhera

In Buhera, displaced families were moved from land that held not only their fields but their burial sites, spiritual shrines, and the geography of their collective identity. Resettlement was conducted without meeting the Free, Prior and Informed Consent standards to which Zimbabwe is bound. Some families were relocated to Murambinda Growth Point, an area designated for urban development with no communal farming land, leaving people who had worked their own soil for generations with no choice but to become job seekers in an economy that had no jobs waiting for them. Children found themselves walking hours longer to reach the nearest school. Some of the boreholes drilled as part of the resettlement package produce rusty water. Compensation houses were registered solely in husbands' names, stripping women of the land rights they had previously enjoyed, and men have benefited from the few jobs offered by the companies far more than women. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission received formal complaints, but progress toward redress has not been measured in years. Families mourn the loss of not only productive land but graves and shrines. This is a violence that no compensation could sufficiently address.

The Value That Leaves

The arithmetic is stark. Zimbabwe exported 1.128 million tonnes of spodumene concentrate in 2025, earning \$513.8 million, an average of roughly \$500/tonne across the year, with prices bottoming at \$610/tonne in June 2025 before rebounding above \$2,000/tonne in early 2026 following the government's export ban, originally scheduled for January 2027. That rebound followed the government's abrupt suspension of all lithium

concentrate exports, a [policy move designed to force mining companies to process lithium in Zimbabwe](#) rather than ship raw material to Chinese refineries, and to crack down on illicit shipments that were entirely bypassing royalty and levy obligations. Battery-grade lithium carbonate spiked to \$25,856/tonne on the Guangzhou Futures Exchange on 26 February 2026, settling to approximately \$22,500/tonne by 9 March 2026. Economist Victor Bhoroma estimates local miners receive less than 3% of the output value per tonne. Communities in Bikita and Buhera, who bear the full cost of displacement, capture even less of that already diminished share.

Stage	Actor	Price per tonne (USD)	Community share
Spodumene concentrate (raw export)	Zimbabwe / Chinese JVs	\$500-\$600/t	<3% of output value (Bhoroma / Al Jazeera, 2024)
Battery-grade lithium carbonate (refined chemical)	Chinese processors (overseas)	\$25,856/t (post-ban spike, 26 Feb 2026, Mining.com); ~\$22,500/t (9 Mar 2026, Trading Economics)	None
Lithium sulfate (intermediate product)	Huayou & Sinomine (in-country plants commissioning 2026)	\$2400-\$3200/t	None
Battery pack / EV (final product)	Western / Asian OEMs	Value multiplied further upstream	None

Sources: Trading Economics (lithium carbonate, 9 Mar 2026); Mining.com / Bloomberg News (26 Feb 2026); Reuters / MMCZ (export data, Feb 2026); Al Jazeera / Economist Victor Bhoroma (2024)

[Zimbabwe's statutory lithium royalty rate is 5%](#), meaning that for every dollar earned from lithium exports, the government is legally entitled to five cents as its share of the resource. Based on the 2025 average export price of approximately \$500/tonne, the state receives around \$9 per tonne. Affected communities receive nothing directly, unless a community share ownership trust exists, a provision in the [2025 Mines and Minerals Amendment Bill](#) that has not yet been applied in either district.

Environment, Social, and Governance on Paper, Harm on the Ground

The companies operating in Bikita and Buhera have published Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) commitments. The [Global Reporting Initiative](#) and the [IFC Performance Standards](#) both require community engagement, proper resettlement, and respect for land rights. These frameworks are cited in the [sustainability reports of companies](#) with operations in Zimbabwe's lithium belt.

Yet, the communities of Bikita and Buhera report experiencing none of the protections those frameworks prescribe. ESG compliance in Zimbabwe's mining sector is assessed primarily through corporate self-reporting and audits commissioned by the companies themselves, with no independent community-level verification. Routing ESG verification funds through African civil society monitors would close that gap while building local accountability infrastructure.

The India Lesson: When Corporate Social Responsibility Becomes Law

There is a model that works. In 2013, India enacted [Section 135 of the Companies Act](#), becoming the first country to mandate Corporate Social Responsibility spending by law. Companies above defined profit thresholds must spend at least 2% of average net profit on CSR activities benefiting communities around their areas of operation. According to the [reports](#), Indian companies collectively spent over ₹1.22 lakh crore on CSR in a recent financial year. Critically, the law built an enforcement architecture: a national spending database, personal board liability for non-compliance, and formal civil society standing to challenge violations. Zimbabwe has no equivalent. Mining companies are nominally required to establish [Community Share Ownership Trusts](#), but there is no national database of community spending, no board liability for non-compliance, and no civil society monitoring mechanism with formal standing. CSR functions largely as voluntary public relations. A mandatory regime modelled on India's Section 135, applied to the lithium sector

alone, would generate tens of millions of dollars annually for the community members of Bikita, Buhera, and other affected districts. The Zimbabwe Environmental Law Organisation (ZELO) have made formal submissions to parliament arguing for precisely this reform. They have not yet been heard.

African Philanthropy's Silence

Into this context arrives a funding crisis. [International donor support for civil society in Zimbabwe has dropped sharply in the 2020s](#). Organisations like [ActionAid Zimbabwe](#), ZELO, and CNRG are documenting violations, supporting community legal claims, and training local monitors on budgets that bear no relationship to the scale of what they face. The [Centre on African Philanthropy and Social Investment](#) and the [West Africa Civil Society Institute \(WACSI\)](#) report significant growth in African high net worth giving, yet none of it has reached the frontline and grassroots organisations working in these mining-affected communities.

“We are told by African philanthropists that African solutions must address African problems. We agree completely. So where are they? We have been fighting for these communities for three years. Not one major African foundation has called us.”

— Tatenda Makasani, an environmental policy activist from Harare

African philanthropy cannot simultaneously argue that external donors undermine African sovereignty while declining to resource the African organisations that sovereignty depends upon. If the decolonisation of aid means anything, it must mean that African capital follows African communities into the hardest fights, including those against foreign capital operating on African soil.

The answers are not absent. They are underfunded. The [CNRG's community paralegal programme](#) trains residents in mining areas to document violations and engage regulators without costly legal representation. [ActionAid Zimbabwe's](#) women's economic rights work has produced a community coalition in marginalized communities that has engaged the Ministry of Mines directly. All these operate below capacity for lack of multi-year African funding. African pension funds and sovereign wealth instruments, increasingly governed by ESG criteria, could direct capital toward the community development obligations mining companies routinely underfulfil.

The Test Ahead

A mandatory CSR framework modelled on India's Section 135, combined with ESG verification and routed through independent African civil society monitors, would close the gap between corporate commitment and community reality. The [2025 Mines and Minerals Amendment bill](#) already contains the seeds of such a regime in its community trust provisions. They need the pressure of funded, independent civil society to become enforceable rather than decorative.

“We do not want pity. We want solidarity. We want African people with resources to see us as partners in a fight that belongs to all of us. The mine does not just take our land. It takes our future. If African philanthropy and the so-called foundations are serious, come here. Walk this ground with us.”

— Selna Mhonda, community organiser, Bikita

The global green transition will be built on African lithium. The communities above those deposits are not passive victims. They are organising, filing complaints, training paralegals, and demanding the birthright to their own land be respected. The question for African philanthropy is whether the capital will follow the argument, or whether Bikita and Buhera will continue to wait on the edge of mines that have taken everything and given back very little.