



Zambia's New Copperbelt: An opportunity for societal transformation and economic development in the Northwestern Province

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Acknowledgments

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COVER PHOTO: Copper plates on a truck at the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Photo: David Pyke / Green Eye / Biosphoto / Biosphoto via AFP

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen regulatory capacity and enforcement:

- The Zambian government should prioritise sustained investment in the technical and human capacity of mining and environmental regulators, particularly in environmental management, monitoring and enforcement.
- This includes specialised training, recruitment of specialised skills, and adequate resourcing of the Minerals Regulation Commission and environmental authorities to close the gap between policy ambition and implementation.

2. Institutionalise meaningful community engagement and FPIC:

- Community consultation processes should be restructured to ensure early, continuous and meaningful participation, in line with FPIC principles.
- This requires clear standards for engagement and mechanisms that enable marginalised groups, particularly women and youth, to influence decision-making processes.

3. Enhanced accessibility to transparency and accountability mechanisms:

- EITI data and other transparency outputs should be simplified, localised and actively disseminated at the community level through relevant civil society actors.
- This includes investing in community capacity to understand and use data, strengthening civil society engagement, and ensuring consistent participation by all mining companies regardless of ownership structure.

4. Integrate gender and social impact

considerations into mining governance:

- Mining governance frameworks should explicitly address gendered and social impacts, including unpaid labour burdens, gender-based violence, health risks and educational disruption.
- Environmental and social impact assessments, monitoring systems and community development programmes should incorporate gender-responsive indicators and prioritise the experiences of women, girls and other marginalised groups to prevent the increase of inequality.

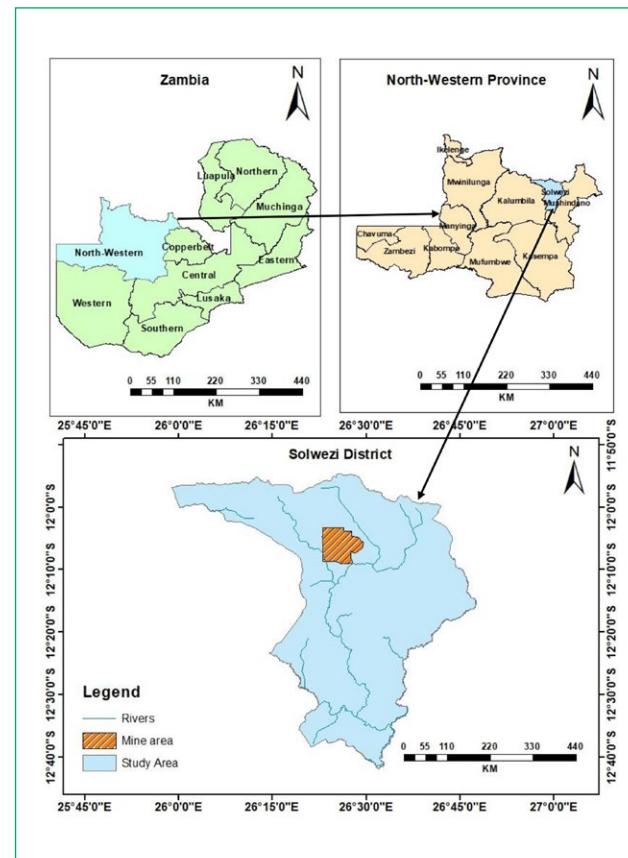
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Zambia's Northwestern Province (NWP) has emerged as a significant region for mining, particularly copper, often referred to as the "New Copperbelt". Meaningful large-scale mining activity in the NWP has primarily spanned the last three to four decades, with the region's geological potential for copper-cobalt deposits being substantial and continuing to drive considerable exploration and development.

Historically, Zambia's economy has been heavily reliant on copper production, with copper and cobalt exports accounting for over 80% of the country's foreign exchange earnings. The traditional Copperbelt Province has been extensively studied and developed since the 1920s. However, the NWP, despite similar geological backgrounds, remained relatively underexplored until the early 2000s when a global commodity boom, partly driven by China's demand, prompted new investments. This led to the establishment of major foreign-owned mines, such as Kansanshi and Lumwana, transforming the socio-economic and environmental landscape of areas like Solwezi, Kabompo, and Kalumbila.

The rapid expansion of mining in the NWP has brought both economic benefits and significant socio-environmental challenges. Economically, mining contributes approximately 12% to Zambia's Gross Domestic Product and provides direct and indirect employment. In practice, this economic activity has also led to rapid urbanisation, with temporary settlements transforming into permanent urban centres, often referred to as 'boomtowns'. These towns, such as Solwezi, have experienced complex socio-economic, spatial, and political transformations due to this fast growth.

Environmentally, mining activities have resulted in substantial land use and cover change (LUCC) dynamics. The figure1 below illustrates the LUCC in Solwezi District between 1990 and 2020. The LUCC in Solwezi District caused by mining operations led to the release of heavy metals into the environment, contaminating soils, drainage systems, and vegetation. In addition, heavy metal contamination, including cadmium, chromium, cobalt, copper, iron, and lead, has been assessed in the Kabompo River, posing significant ecological risks. Similarly, the



Solwezi and Kifubwa Rivers have shown variability in heavy metal concentrations in surface sediments that have adversely impacted forests, particularly for wood fuel and infrastructure.

The socio-economic impacts of mining activities in NWP are complex, and yet, there is a great sense of acknowledgement of the employment opportunities mining brings to the province. In practice, it has exacerbated social stratification and resource distribution issues. The electricity crisis in Zambia, for example, highlights how privately-owned copper mines consume over half of the electrical energy produced, while only 22% of private households are connected to the national grid, creating disparities even in new urban centres within the NWP. As such, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives by mining companies in NWP aim to contribute to local sustainable development.

The mining landscape of Zambia's Northwestern Province, particularly Solwezi and Kalumbila, has undergone significant transformation in recent decades due to large-

1 Tiamgne, X.T., Kalaba, K.F., and Nyirenda. V.R. 2021. [Land use and cover change dynamics in Zambia's Solwezi copper mining district](#). *Scientific African*. Elsevier.

scale copper mining investments. With this context, this research study explored the NWP, specifically Kalumbila and Solwezi, with the aim of understanding and assessing how mining regulatory frameworks are implemented in practice, how corporate players deliver on governance and social responsibility commitments, and how local government and initiatives influence the developmental, social, and environmental outcomes of mining activities.

In addition, it studied the relationship between traditional leadership and the State, with a focus on authority over resource management, processes of distribution, and benefit-sharing arrangements. Finally, it analyses the intersectional impacts of mining, paying particular attention to gendered power relations, and how mining governance structures should support societal transformation and economic development.

GROWING MINING INVESTMENT AND ACTIVITIES: KEY PROJECTS IN NWP, ZAMBIA

Kansanshi Mine, located near Solwezi and operated by First Quantum Minerals (FQM), a Canadian-based mining and metals company, in partnership with ZCCM Investment Holdings (ZCCM-IH), a state-owned investment holding company, remains the largest copper mine in Africa by output. Ongoing capital investment at Kansanshi, most notably the S3 expansion project, is designed to significantly increase production capacity while extending the life of the mine well into the next decade.

Further west, Lumwana Mine, now operated by Barrick Mining Corporation, a Canadian-based mining company, continues to be a major contributor to provincial and national production. Barrick's renewed investment plans, including proposals to expand mining operations through the development of a "super pit," signal long-term confidence in the resource base of the province. Alongside Lumwana, the Kalumbila (Trident) operations, FQM, have consolidated the province as a high-volume, industrial-scale copper producer with extensive supporting infrastructure.

These large mines have driven significant employment growth and secondary economic activity in recent years. Construction work linked to mine expansions, coupled with ongoing operations, has created thousands of

direct and indirect jobs, stimulating demand for services, transport, housing, and local procurement. For one, Solwezi and Kalumbila have expanded rapidly, reflecting the broader socio-economic impact of mining-led growth in the province.

Beyond the key existing operations, NWP has become a focal point for new exploration investment. International mining companies have increasingly turned their attention to the province's underexplored geological terrain, which forms part of the broader Central African Copperbelt system. Recent acquisitions of large exploration licence packages by companies such as Ivanhoe Mines indicate growing investor interest in discovering the next generation of copper deposits. This exploration activity indicates that mining in the province is expanding vertically through mine upgrades, and importantly, horizontally through the potential development of new projects.

As such, the investment momentum in the province is closely tied to Zambia's broader mining policy direction. The government has positioned copper as a strategic mineral critical to economic recovery, debt sustainability, and participation in the global energy transition. More importantly, NWP is central to national targets to substantially increase copper production over the next decade. Additionally, policy discussions increasingly emphasise local value addition, supply-chain development, and greater participation of Zambian companies in mining services.

In practice, the rapid expansion of mining activity has brought significant challenges, particularly infrastructure pressure, environmental management, land use conflicts, and community relations. With this context, there has been heightened scrutiny of waste management, tailings safety, and regulatory enforcement across the sector, shaping both investor behaviour and public expectations in the province.

A SNAPSHOT OF ZAMBIA'S REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

As Zambia's mining sector expands, driven by rising copper demand and renewed exploration interest, the country's mining landscape is increasingly shaped by a complex interplay of regulatory, fiscal, and institutional frameworks. This complexity indicates the importance of having clear, coherent, and consistently enforced governance frameworks to manage investment as well as balance the State's and private sector interests. Through its dual governance system of balancing between statutory and customary law, socio-economic as well as environmental impacts must be well managed.

Zambia has formulated and established mining policies and legislation aimed at governing the extractives sector as effectively as possible. The Mines and Minerals Development Act (MMDA) (No. 13 of 2022)² is central to guiding the sector, having replaced the 2008 Act, and introduced provisions for stricter environmental protection, including mandatory Community Development Agreements (CDAs), and enhanced state equity participation in tandem with traditional authorities.

In practice, institutional oversight and formal authority over mineral rights rest with the State through the Ministry of Mines and Minerals Development (MMMD)³,

with support from the Mining Safety Department (MSD), and the Zambia Environmental Management Agency (ZEMA)⁴. ZEMA is mandated with enforcing the Environmental Management Act (No. 12 of 2011), which requires environmental impact assessments (EIAs) before project implementation to protect environmental rights. These provisions are critical given the significant land use and land cover (LULC) changes associated with mining activities.

For example, a 2024 research study⁵ found that copper exploration in Kitwe District of the Copperbelt Province led to adverse environmental impacts, mapping⁶ LULC changes from 1990 to 2020 and assessing the adequacy of mine closure legal frameworks. In theory, the Environmental Protection Fund audits are a strategy meant to ensure regulatory compliance in Zambia's mining sector. However, compliance among mining companies varies, with some mining houses complying well, while many others need substantial improvements in practices, including addressing outdated plans. High effluent pollution levels also contribute to non-compliance, indicating inadequate monitoring capacity. As such, the efficacy of EIAs, though mandated, is often compromised by enforcement gaps and insufficient institutional resources.

As noted earlier, one of the key environmental challenges in Zambia's mining towns is heavy metal contamination.



Photo: GGA&CNRG

ABOVE: School of Mines – University of Zambia.

2 [Mines and Minerals Development Act \(No. 13 of 2022\)](#). Blackhall Publishing.

3 [Ministry of Mines and Mineral Development](#).

4 [Zambia Environmental Management Agency](#).

5 Mutimba, K.; Watanabe, T.; Chand, M.B. 2024. [Land Use Land Cover \(LULC\) Change Dynamics Associated with Mining Activities in Kitwe District and Adequacy of the Legal Framework on Mine Closure in Zambia](#). Earth.

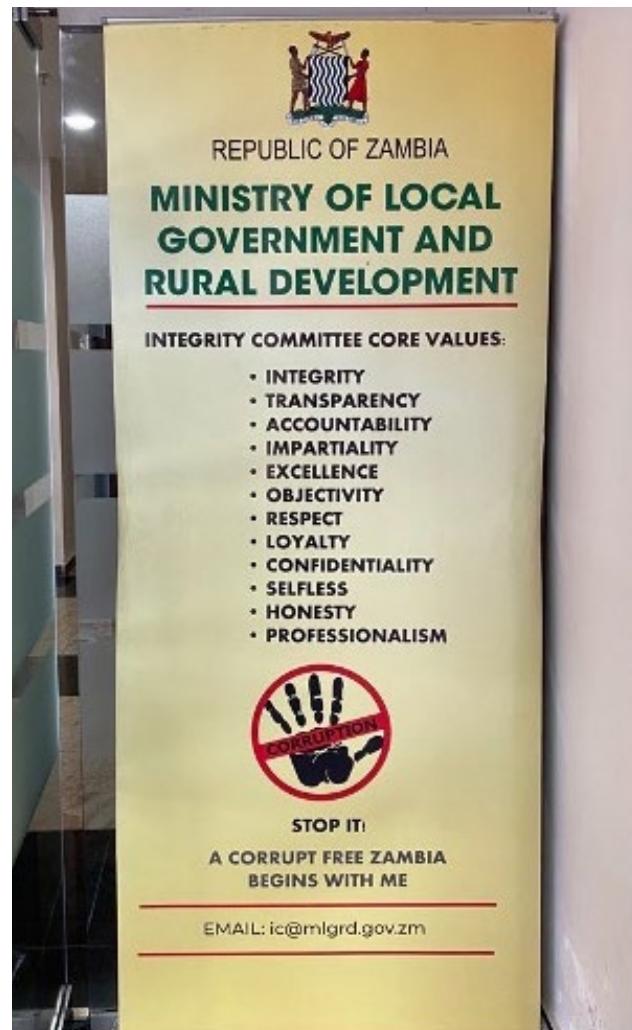
6 Ibid.

A 2021 research study⁷ conducted in Solwezi and Kifubwa Rivers in the Northwestern Province showed that the variability and accumulation of heavy metals in surface sediments were significantly affecting ecological and biodiversity conservation. This, in turn, negatively impacts natural resource management.⁸ In addition, this reveals direct environmental health risks linked to mining activities that demand strong regulatory oversight to prevent bioaccumulation and biomagnification in food chains. To this end, effective environmental health governance, therefore, needs to operate at multiple scales, from protecting human rights to managing community-wide risks.

Looking closely at the people and community development nexus of mining investment, the CDAs are put into place facilitate the delivery of tangible benefits to affected communities.⁹ In the Zambian case, traditional leaders retain significant influence over land decisions, local communities, and thus become the primary contact for prospectors and investors in the mining sector. While the State holds formal authority over mineral rights through the MMMD.

On the one hand, the State holds ownership of subsurface mineral resources. Under statutory law, the President holds all mineral rights on behalf of the Republic and its people. Mining rights and licensing are governed centrally through the MMMD and statutory instruments such as the MMDA. The State is responsible for issuing permits for exploration, small-scale and large-scale mining operations, environmental oversight and revenue mechanisms, including environmental impact assessments and royalty structures. Importantly, the State is responsible for developing and implementing investment instruments. In this regard, the State recently established the Zambia Minerals Corporation Limited¹⁰ to serve as a special purpose vehicle for trade and investment in minerals to ensure benefits accrue for Zambians beyond statutory obligations.

On the other hand, customary authorities manage the land, particularly rural land where many of the mineral resources



ABOVE: Zambia Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development.

outlined above lie. Customary law points out that land remains under the oversight of Chiefs and local authorities, who are the custodians on behalf of communities and not owners of the land. As such, Chiefs hold significant cultural and social legitimacy within their communities, where they are responsible for guiding consent and land negotiations for mining companies seeking to operate on customary land. In addition, they are responsible for conflict mediation and compensation discussions to ensure that communities benefit from mining activities. However, in practice, this dual governing system between state-led regulatory frameworks and customary structures does not effectively work.

⁷ Hasimuna, O.J. Chibesa, M., Ellender, B.R, Maulu, S., 2021. *Variability of selected heavy metals in surface sediments and ecological risks in the Solwezi and Kifubwa Rivers, Northwestern Province, Zambia*. *Scientific African*. Elsevier.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gunton, T., Werker, E., Markey, S. 2021. *Community benefit agreements and natural resource development: Achieving better outcomes*. *Resources Policy*. Elsevier.

¹⁰ *Zambia Minerals Corporation Limited*.



ABOVE: Centre for Trade Policy and Development.

For one, CDAs are negotiated without meaningful Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) with affected communities and thus, undermining the intended purposes of this dual system and the provisions made in the MMDA. In addition, benefit-sharing mechanisms remain inconsistently monitored, leading to structural and systematic challenges that disproportionately affect mining communities.¹¹

A 2023 World Bank assessment indicated that only a minority of CDAs in the Northwestern Province underwent independent social impact verification, and environmental compliance audits frequently revealed non-compliance among mid-tier operators. This highlights a disconnect between policy intent and practical outcomes.¹² These challenges have led to complex economic and social impacts of mining activities that have resulted in significant underdevelopment in the mining regions of Zambia.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENTS AND COMMUNITY PROFILES: KEY FINDINGS

Between 14 – 18 July 2025, Good Governance Africa conducted interviews in Lusaka, Solwezi and Kalumbila of NWP, with relevant stakeholders and community representatives. The interviews, conducted under Chatham House rules, were semi-structured with government officials, traditional leaders, civil society actors, academics, mining companies, and community members.

The engagements were conducted in a safe and secure environment where participants felt safe to respond to the semi-structured questions related to mining developments in NWP. The key findings are shared in summary form, highlighting key takeaways from participants:

- Across the engagements, participants consistently emphasised that Zambia possesses a relatively well-developed legal and institutional framework for mining governance. Recent legislative reforms, including the repeal of the Mines and Minerals Act of 2015 and its replacement with the Minerals Regulation Act and the Geological & Minerals Act, were frequently cited as evidence of progress.
 - These reforms were widely understood to have improved transparency in the licensing process, particularly through the introduction of a digital mining cadastre system that maps mining rights geographically and indicates who holds them, for how long, and under what conditions. The Geological Act, particularly, was seen as signalling a stronger commitment to local content, including expectations that a portion of mineral value addition be undertaken locally.
- Participants repeatedly pointed to a growing gap between policy intent and implementation. The establishment of the Minerals Regulation Commission was viewed as a positive development, especially given its mandate to monitor the sector, enforce compliance, and penalise non-compliant actors.
- Yet its effectiveness, like that of other regulatory institutions, was seen as constrained by a persistent skills deficit, particularly in environmental management and technical oversight. Several

11 Bertinelli, L., Bourgoin A., 2023. *Mining revenues and quality of public goods in Sub-Saharan Africa. Journal of International Development*. Wiley.

12 Ibid.

stakeholders noted that mining is central to Zambia's economy, yet the state institutions responsible for regulating it remain under-resourced and understaffed.

- Questions around community engagement featured prominently throughout the interviews. While government and industry actors often asserted that communities are consulted and engaged, community representatives and civil society organisations raised concerns about the depth and meaningfulness of these processes.
 - Engagements were frequently described as high-level and procedural, with limited evidence that community priorities meaningfully shape project design or policy outcomes. Participants questioned whether consultation processes consistently meet the standards of FPIC, noting that marginalised groups are often excluded through structural barriers.
 - Power dynamics were repeatedly highlighted, particularly the difficulty community members face in engaging with members of parliament, regulators, or senior officials on an equal footing.
- These challenges are compounded by tensions surrounding benefit sharing. Zambia's unitary tax system means that mining revenues are collected centrally and redistributed nationally, a structure that many participants felt weakens the link between mining activity and local development outcomes.
- There is no formal profit-sharing mechanism for host communities, and debates persist over whether royalties or revenue-sharing arrangements would be more effective. While mining companies have invested in corporate social responsibility and community development initiatives, these efforts were widely described as fragmented and insufficiently aligned with community needs. Several stakeholders argued that the state must play a stronger role in incentivising or compelling companies to move beyond minimum compliance if long-term social stability is to be maintained.
- The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) was broadly recognised as a valuable tool for improving transparency, particularly through disclosures related to revenues, contracts and beneficial ownership.
 - Participants noted that Zambia's EITI process involves multiple oversight institutions, including the Auditor General and the Anti-Corruption Commission.

- Nevertheless, there was widespread frustration that EITI data is rarely translated into forms that communities can access or use effectively.
- As a result, the transparency gains achieved at the national level often fail to translate into accountability at the local level. In some cases, participants also raised concerns about political interference and uneven engagement by different mining companies, often influenced by ownership structures and geopolitical considerations.
- Environmental governance emerged as one of the most critical and contentious areas of concern. Despite the existence of environmental regulations and the formal adoption of the polluter pays principle, participants pointed to repeated failures in enforcement.
- Weak early warning systems, limited monitoring capacity, and inadequate penalties were cited as contributing to ongoing environmental harm. Pollution incidents affecting the Congo-Zambezi river system were highlighted as particularly severe, given their downstream impacts on livestock, crops and livelihoods.
- Even where companies were compelled to provide compensation, participants reported that such measures were often inadequate to address long-term losses and environmental degradation.



ABOVE: Zambia Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative.

- Underlying many of these governance challenges is the complexity of land tenure in Zambia. Most mining activity takes place on customary land, accessed through traditional authorities, creating overlapping and sometimes conflicting systems of authority.
- Amid these challenges, some community-driven initiatives were identified as offering more promising models of engagement. The Barrick Lumwana Trust, established in 2005 by three Chiefs, was frequently cited as an example of a more structured and locally responsive approach to managing community development resources.
 - The trust serves approximately 200,000 people across three Chiefdoms and is governed by a trustee structure that combines traditional leadership with community-elected representatives. Its investments in education, health, sanitation, agriculture and income-generating activities were widely viewed as more aligned with local priorities than earlier, uncoordinated CSR efforts.
 - Nonetheless, tensions remain over revenue levels, procurement practices and the interaction between trust structures and government-led community development funding.
- Participants consistently emphasised that the impacts of mining are not experienced equally within host communities. Rather, they described how gender, age, socio-economic status, location, and cultural norms shape who benefits from mining developments and who bears the costs.
- Some noted that while mining is often presented as a pathway to economic development, its arrival reconfigures entire community structures, livelihoods, and daily routines in ways that tend to disadvantage women, young girls, and other marginalised groups.
- Women participants in particular spoke about carrying a disproportionate burden of environmental and social change linked to mining. They described how environmental degradation, such as polluted water sources and degraded agricultural land, has intensified their unpaid labour. Fetching water now often requires travelling longer distances, while farming on contaminated or less productive land has made it harder to secure food and household income. These pressures were described not as isolated challenges, but as cumulative stresses that shape everyday life.
- Girls' education was described as particularly vulnerable by various stakeholders, with some participants linking school drop-out to household poverty and caregiving responsibilities.
- The influx of predominantly male workers was frequently linked to increased gender-based violence and harassment, both within households and in public spaces.
- Community members spoke of rising levels of sex work, alongside increased alcohol consumption and higher rates of sexually transmitted infections.
- Participants stressed that mining should not be understood solely as an economic activity. Instead, they described it as a powerful force that reshapes social relations, redistributes risks, and reproduces existing inequalities.
- From their perspectives, mining developments have profound implications for gender relations, community wellbeing, and social justice, particularly for women and young girls whose experiences are often overlooked in formal assessments and policy responses.

CONCLUSION

Zambia's mining governance framework in North-Western Province is characterised by strong formal institutions but uneven practical outcomes. Legal reforms, transparency mechanisms and consultation processes are in place, yet their effectiveness is consistently undermined by capacity constraints, power imbalances and political economy dynamics. As the country seeks to rapidly expand mining output, particularly in strategic minerals, the persistence of these structural challenges risks deepening community dissatisfaction and environmental harm unless more deliberate efforts are made to strengthen implementation, accountability and meaningful participation.



ABOVE: A copper ore treatment plant in Ndola, Zambia.

Photo: Sylvain Cordier / Bloomberg / Getty Images via AFP

For bespoke research, contact our
Good Governance Africa advisory services team.

Contact us

Tel: 011 268 0479

Email: info@gga.org

Web: www.gga.org

