



# Strengthening community-centered resource governance in Mbire and Muzarabani districts, Zimbabwe

By Sikhululekile Mashingaidze; Farai Makururu and Donald Nyarota

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**COVER PHOTO:** Masawu (*Ziziphus mauritiana*) at a women's vending stall in Mbire, Zimbabwe.

Photo: GGA & CNRG

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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Policy Recommendations</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. Current State: Consultation, Governance, and Community Conditions</b>	<b>2</b>
2.1 Community Engagement: Progress and Gaps	2
2.2 Access to Economic Opportunities: Current Barriers	3
2.3 Environmental and Social Impacts: Early Warning Signs	3
2.4 Infrastructure Deficits: Urgent Needs	4
<b>3 Community Priorities: A Development Agenda</b>	<b>4</b>
3.1 Sustainable Economic Transformation	4
3.2 Gender Justice and Social Protection	5
3.3 Climate Resilience and Environmental Stewardship	5
<b>4 Recommendations: Pathways to Inclusive Resource Governance</b>	<b>6</b>
4.1 Institutionalise Meaningful, Continuous Community Engagement	6
4.2 Establish Legitimate Community Representation and Transparent Benefit Sharing	6
4.3 Create Transparent, Merit-Based Employment and Procurement Systems	6
4.4 Invest Strategically in Climate Adaptation and Essential Infrastructure	7
<b>5. Conclusion</b>	<b>8</b>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This short research report synthesises findings from two phases of community-based fieldwork (2022 and 2025) conducted by Good Governance Africa and the Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG) in Zimbabwe's Mbire and Muzarabani districts, where Invictus Energy is exploring for potential oil and gas reserves estimated at 9.25 trillion cubic feet of gas and nearly 300 million barrels of oil.<sup>1</sup> While the project received National Project Status in September 2025,<sup>2</sup> discussions with a major investor concluded in January 2026, creating a critical window to strengthen governance frameworks before any intensified extraction occurs. The research reveals important gaps in community engagement, employment access, and infrastructure development, which, if unaddressed, risk replicating Zimbabwe's historical pattern where extractive wealth fails to translate into community development gains. Communities face extreme poverty (88.4% in some wards), acute climate vulnerability, and severe infrastructure deficits, yet demonstrate clear priorities for inclusive economic participation, transparent benefit-sharing, and climate-resilient development. The recommendations below outline practical pathways for Invictus Energy, future investors, and the Government of Zimbabwe to establish community-centred resource governance that creates shared prosperity while building genuine social license for operations.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish comprehensive, continuous community engagement: Move beyond leadership-level consultations to regular community-wide dialogues with translation into indigenous languages and transparent information sharing on exploration results, employment opportunities, and project timelines.
- Institute community representation in governance structures: Appoint legitimate community representatives to project boards with clearly defined benefit-sharing mechanisms, transparent decision-making processes, and accountability to constituents.
- Implement transparent local employment systems: Publish clear employment criteria and selection processes, reserve specific positions for local residents based on merit rather than political affiliation, and report publicly on hiring outcomes.
- Invest in climate adaptation and critical infrastructure: Address the region's acute vulnerabilities through flood mitigation, environmental protection, and essential infrastructure (roads, schools, healthcare) that will remain valuable regardless of project outcomes.

### About this briefing:

This report synthesises research conducted by Good Governance Africa (GGA) and the Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG) in Mbire and Muzarabani Districts, Zimbabwe, during 2022 (Phase 1) and 2025 (Phase 2). Research included focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and document analysis.

For the full Phase 1 report, see: Good Governance Africa and Centre for Natural Resource Governance (2023), The Cabora Bassa Oil and Gas Project: An Assessment of the Project's Social, Economic, and Environmental Impacts on Local Communities in Muzarabani and Mbire Districts.

1 The Herald. (2025) Muzarabani oil and gas project gains momentum as Government, Invictus, seal profit-sharing deal. <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/muzarabani-oil-and-gas-project-gains-momentum-as-government-invictus-seal-profit-sharing-deal/> accessed February 3, 20226.

2 Invictus Energy Ltd, Cabora Bassa officially granted National Project Status & PPSA terms agreed. invictus energy <https://api.investi.com.au/api/announcements/ivz/1ea25535-8e4.pdf> accessed February 3, 2026.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Cabora Bassa Basin oil and gas project presents both a significant opportunity and considerable responsibility for Zimbabwe's energy future and the Mbire and Muzarabani communities. Following Invictus Energy's discovery of potential hydrocarbon reserves – estimated at 9.25 trillion cubic feet of gas and nearly 300 million barrels of oil<sup>3</sup> – the project received National Project Status in September 2025<sup>4</sup> and secured a Petroleum Production Sharing Agreement in December 2025<sup>5</sup>. However, in January 2026, Invictus Energy ceased discussions with Qatar's Al Mansour Holdings<sup>6</sup>, creating uncertainty about the immediate next steps.

This policy briefing synthesises findings from two phases of research conducted by Good Governance Africa (GGA) and the Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG) in 2022 and 2025. Phase 1 assessed initial community consultation processes and environmental impacts. Phase 2 established community resource governance priorities, focusing on the Just Energy Transition, household energy use, responsible mining practices, and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) considerations.

The research reveals important gaps between current practice and community needs in areas of engagement, infrastructure, and environmental protection. These gaps are not insurmountable, but they require deliberate attention now – during this transitional period – to establish governance frameworks that can guide any eventual extraction toward inclusive outcomes. The findings reflect broader patterns in Zimbabwe's extractive sector where natural resource wealth has historically not translated into community development gains, a pattern that can be reversed through intentional policy choices.

The Mbire<sup>7</sup> and Muzarabani<sup>8</sup> districts, home to a combined total of at least 217 800 people, face substantial

development challenges, including extreme poverty (88.4%), poverty prevalence in some Muzarabani wards, chronic food insecurity, and acute climate vulnerability. The communities' priorities, articulated through focus group discussions and key informant interviews, offer clear guidance for investors and government on what an effective partnership requires.

## 2. CURRENT STATE: CONSULTATION, GOVERNANCE, AND COMMUNITY CONDITIONS

### 2.1 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: PROGRESS AND GAPS

Community consultations to date have focused primarily on traditional and political leadership. A project presentation meeting was held on 27 July 2021 at the Zambezi Escape Lodge with the Mbire Rural District leadership, and traditional ceremonies were held in Muzarabani.<sup>9</sup> These represent important initial steps in securing traditional approvals and informing local government structures.

However, research findings indicate these consultations have not effectively reached ordinary community members. Multiple respondents across both districts reported limited awareness of project details until researchers specifically asked about Invictus Energy. This information gap partly reflects what researchers describe as "self-censorship" in Zimbabwe's constrained civic space, but also points to the need for more direct, ongoing communication with communities.

At the time of fieldwork, in September 2025, respondents indicated that Invictus Energy operations were halted, and they remained unaware of exploration results, despite drilling completion at Mukuyu-2 in December 2023, which

3 The Herald. (2025). Muzarabani oil and gas project gains momentum as Government, Invictus, seal profit-sharing deal. <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/muzarabani-oil-and-gas-project-gains-momentum-as-government-invictus-seal-profit-sharing-deal/> accessed February 3, 2026.

4 Invictus Energy Ltd, Cabora Bassa officially granted National Project Status & PPSA terms agreed. invictus energy. <https://api.investi.com.au/api/announcements/ivz/1ea25535-8e4.pdf> accessed February 3, 2026.

5 Invictus Energy Ltd, Cabora Bassa Petroleum Production Sharing Agreement Process Completed. invictus energy. <https://api.investi.com.au/api/announcements/ivz/55dc7463-ad0.pdf> accessed February 3, 2026.

6 Invictus Energy Ltd, Al Mansour Holdings Strategic Partnership Update. invictus energy. <https://api.investi.com.au/api/announcements/ivz/f1658665-064.pdf> accessed February 3, 2026.

7 Food & Nutrition Council. (2023). Mbire District Profile. Harare: FNC. <https://fnc.org.zw/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Mbire-District-Profile.pdf> accessed February 3, 2026.

8 Food & Nutrition Council. (2023). Muzarabani District Profile. Harare: FNC. <http://www.fnc.org.zw/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Muzarabani-District-Profile.pdf> accessed February 3, 2026. <https://www.fnc.org.zw/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Muzarabani-District-Profile.pdf> accessed February 3, 2026.

9 Buchanan-Clarke, S. (2023). The Cabora Bassa Oil and Gas Project: An Assessment of the Project's Social, Economic, and Environmental Impacts on Local Communities in Muzarabani and Mbire Districts. Good Governance Africa (GGA). <https://digitalmallblobstorage.blob.core.windows.net/wp-content/2023/03/Cabora-Bassa-report.pdf> accessed February 3, 2026.

identified 13 potential hydrocarbon-bearing zones.<sup>10</sup> One participant summarised the employment pattern: “Invictus oil and gas company managed to recruit its own workers, excluding the majority of local people and as such, both skilled and unskilled workers were significantly taken from outside Mbire and Muzarabani.”

The current engagement approach falls short of Free, Prior, Informed and Continuous Consent principles, which require ongoing dialogue throughout project phases, not just initial approval-seeking. This gap creates risks: communities that feel excluded from decision-making and uninformed about developments are less likely to support operations, regardless of project benefits.

## 2.2 ACCESS TO ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES: CURRENT BARRIERS

Community members consistently reported that access to mining-related employment – both with Invictus Energy and smaller operations – depends heavily on political affiliation or personal networks, described locally as “Chizivano” (connections). The Chinhofu gold mine, which respondents indicated is mainly constituted of ZANU-PF youth and has reported links to Invictus Energy, exemplifies this pattern.

Several respondents noted that “some projects were not awarded transparently and were dependent on one’s political affiliation or networks.” Traditional and political leaders who participated in consultation processes reportedly used these opportunities to secure jobs for their children and relatives, a form of nepotism that excludes qualified community members who lack political connections.

In Mbire, only two people were employed at Mukuyu sites; in Muzarabani, “only a few people” secured positions. This outcome has created frustration and skepticism about whether the project will generate meaningful local economic participation.

The barrier is not lack of community interest or capacity. Respondents acknowledged that while locals may not possess highly specialized technical skills, “there were non-

expert roles that could be specifically reserved for locals.” The issue is absence of transparent, merit-based systems that create equitable access to opportunities.

## 2.3 ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS: EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Communities articulated well-founded concerns about extractive industries’ social impacts, calling for proactive planning rather than reactive responses. Respondents cited specific challenges associated with gold mining: violence (particularly gender-based domestic violence), increased crime, child labour, early marriages, prostitution, and “general moral decadence that often leads to families’ fragmentation.”

The impact on education is measurable: children as young as grades six and seven are dropping out to pursue artisanal mining. This represents immediate human capital loss with long-term consequences for community development.

Women and girls face particular vulnerabilities. One woman key informant from Mushumbi described these impacts as “huyipi hurikungotenderera” – an indigenous ChiShona phrase which means “a vicious cycle of depravity” which she argued requires high level government intervention as it is beyond the capacity of parents, teachers, and local leadership to address. The Chinhofu mine was cited specifically as a site where pursuit of employment has been “exploited to girls and women’s detriment,” leading some husbands to prohibit their wives from vending near or working in mines.

Environmental concerns are equally serious. The districts’ low-lying terrain creates high flood vulnerability – more than 70% of Mbire households are assessed as “highly vulnerable” to flooding.<sup>11</sup> Climate change has already altered rainfall patterns significantly (rains now arrive in December or January rather than October), reducing crop yields and intensifying food insecurity.

The project’s potential to increase flood risk and deforestation, while contributing to greenhouse gas emissions, creates tension with Zimbabwe’s climate commitments. However, respondents also noted that

<sup>10</sup> Invictus Energy Limited. MUKUYU GAS FIELD: Discovered in December 2023 during the Mukuyu-2 drilling campaign. invictus energy <https://www.invictusenergy.com/> accessed February 3, 2026.

<sup>11</sup> Mudavanhu, C., Manyangadze, T., Mavhura, E. et al. Rural households’ vulnerability and risk of flooding in Mbire District, Zimbabwe. *Nat Hazards* 103, 3591-3608 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11069-020-04145-y>

“mining could improve their livelihoods if it was well regulated” and could address unemployment challenges – indicating that communities see potential benefits if governance structures are strengthened.

## 2.4 INFRASTRUCTURE DEFICITS: URGENT NEEDS

Community infrastructure across both districts requires substantial investment, regardless of mining activities:

- **Roads:** Infrastructure is dilapidated and difficult to navigate. A road from Mahuwe to Kanyemba<sup>12</sup> has been under construction for more than three years, with less than 20km completed on a 180km stretch, with reports that the construction company has since abandoned the project. In Mushumbi Motorbikes serve as the primary transport mode because they’re cheaper and can navigate these poor road conditions. <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/mahuhwe-kanyemba-road-works-to-restart-after-delays/>
- **Education:** The public education system is in what respondents described as a “free-fall state of destruction.” Contributing factors include both student and teacher truancy, with some teachers failing to conduct lessons regularly. Schools in Madzomba and Nyambudzi areas need classroom blocks and sanitation facilities. Students travel very long distances to access secondary schools, contributing to poor performance and dropouts. The interest expressed by parents in private schools in rural Muzarabani – unusual for rural areas – indicates declining confidence in public education. They argued that they are worth that extra cost, as children have better access to education there.
- **Healthcare:** Multiple respondents described the health sector as having “totally collapsed” or being “paralysed and in intensive care unit.” Those who can afford it use private health institutions, which are beyond most citizens’ reach. Many residents travel to Zambia and Mozambique for treatment because they’re “guaranteed of securing medical attention and medication”, unavailable locally.
- **Energy Access:** Household energy options are limited. Firewood is most common but increasingly prohibited by the Environmental Management Agency (EMA) due to deforestation, causing “massive siltation along the Hunyani/Dande confluence.” Gas is preferred,

especially by women, for its speed and convenience, but it is expensive, at US\$2.50 per kilogram. Coal is cheaper but environmentally harmful. Electricity from the national grid is unreliable due to “regular power cuts resulting from loadshedding and endless faults” because of dilapidated infrastructure. One Mushumbi Pools respondent noted that despite being connected to the grid, she relies primarily on solar power and gas “as the national electricity supply is down for much of the year.”

These deficits create both immediate hardship and long-term development constraints. Addressing them represents essential foundation-building for any sustainable development agenda.

## 3. COMMUNITY PRIORITIES: A DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

### 3.1 SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

Community members articulated clear expectations that any investor should “strive to improve the economic standards of living for the locals” and “lay an economic base or superstructure from which locals can sustainably earn.” This framing moves beyond temporary employment toward building lasting economic capacity.

Respondents emphasised that “the Dande community has suffered years of marginalisation” and therefore mining investors’ priorities should include “addressing high unemployment and corporate philanthropy.” However, they also noted that while some community development interventions have been reported to date, they “anticipate that more structural, transformative ones will be delivered should the project reach the production stage.”

Communities demonstrated pragmatic awareness of skill levels while asserting the right to participate. They noted that historical livelihood sources like cotton farming are no longer sustainable due to market volatility, creating need for “alternative livelihood streams such as employment.” Some farmers have successfully shifted to sesame farming, which has better market uptake in Mozambique,

<sup>12</sup> The Herald. (2022). Mahuhwe-Kanyemba road works to restart after delays. <https://www.heraldonline.co.zw/mahuhwe-kanyemba-road-works-to-restart-after-delays/> accessed February 3, 2026.



Photo: GGA&CNRG

**ABOVE:** Motorbikes offer the main mode of transport in Mushumbi Pools growth point, as they are cheaper, convenient and better navigate the community's derelict road infrastructure for the commuters' mobility needs.

demonstrating adaptive capacity that could be amplified through strategic support.

### **3.2 GENDER JUSTICE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION**

Women respondents proposed “ongoing gender mainstreaming campaigns to demystify some of what they termed irrational perceptions in both the society and the mining sector that are applied selectively to men and women.” This reflects recognition that mining’s social impacts disproportionately affect women and girls, while patriarchal norms limit even morally upright women’s livelihood options by blanket application of restrictions designed to address moral concerns.

Some respondents suggested that “only a total ban could save communities from mining’s vicious cycle of depravity,” while others argued that “mining was necessary for communities’ economic benefits and should be robustly regulated by both the government and investors.” This tension underscores the urgency of proactive social planning rather than treating negative impacts as inevitable externalities.

### **3.3 CLIMATE RESILIENCE AND ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP**

Community members demonstrated acute awareness of climate change impacts – altered rainfall patterns, increased flooding, crop damage, and wildlife encroachment into domestic spaces. One senior community leader noted: “In the past, rains used to start in October but now only come in December or even in January, with floods that further damage our crops and homes.”

Respondents emphasised that while the project has “potential to enhance their communities’ and Zimbabwe’s energy sector and economy, it is critical to proactively plan for environmental impact, and community benefit sharing.” They specifically highlighted concerns about “the risk of flooding and environmental degradation and the project’s likelihood to contribute to greenhouse gas emissions, contradicting Zimbabwe’s climate change commitments.”

This is not anti-development sentiment but rather a call for responsible development that addresses rather than exacerbates existing vulnerabilities.

## 4. RECOMMENDATIONS: PATHWAYS TO INCLUSIVE RESOURCE GOVERNANCE

### 4.1 INSTITUTIONALISE MEANINGFUL, CONTINUOUS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Current consultation approaches should evolve to embrace Free, Prior, Informed and Continuous Consent principles through:

- **Regular community-wide meetings** that go beyond traditional and political leadership to “elicit insights from ordinary community members,” as Phase 1 recommended. Multiple respondents suggested that “community engagement should go beyond community leaders and, through community-wide meetings, for example, elicit insights from ordinary community members.”
- **Multi-lingual information dissemination** through translation of critical information into indigenous Shona dialects for website content and written materials, ensuring accessibility for all literacy and language levels.
- **Transparent progress reporting** on exploration results, project timelines, employment processes, and benefit-sharing mechanisms. Communities cannot meaningfully participate in decisions without information.
- **Accessible feedback and grievance mechanisms** that enable communities to raise concerns and receive responses, with clear protocols for conflict resolution.

This is not merely good practice but a practical necessity. Projects that maintain information asymmetries between investors/government and communities create conditions for mistrust, regardless of actual intentions or benefits.

### 4.2 ESTABLISH LEGITIMATE COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION AND TRANSPARENT BENEFIT SHARING

Decision-making about the project has largely been at the political elite and community leadership level, despite Constitutional provisions (Section 13) obligating the state to involve ordinary people in developments affecting them. The Production Sharing Agreement and Petroleum

Exploration Development and Production Agreement remain unpublished, creating accountability gaps.

To address this:

- **Community representatives should be appointed to project governance structures** such as boards or steering committees, with voting rights and clear accountability to constituents. As Phase 1 recommended, “A place for community representation at the board level should be made for the project.”
- Community infrastructure initiatives, as highlighted on the company’s website<sup>13</sup>, are commendable and worthy of replication during this exploration phase. **Most critical, however, is making public the production stage benefit-sharing agreements that should specify** mechanisms for local employment, large-scale infrastructure investment, and revenue allocation. Paul Chimbodza’s statement to Mbire leadership about a 50-50 split between GeoAssociates and government is a commendable starting point, and can be solidified through further clarity on how the government’s share will trickle to host communities.
- **Independent oversight mechanisms** should monitor compliance with commitments, with regular public reporting that builds accountability.

Public disclosure serves both transparency and investor protection – clear, published agreements reduce misunderstandings and create predictable operating frameworks.

### 4.3 CREATE TRANSPARENT, MERIT-BASED EMPLOYMENT AND PROCUREMENT SYSTEMS

To overcome current barriers rooted in political affiliation and nepotism:

- **Publish clear employment criteria** for all position types (skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled), specifying qualifications, experience, and selection processes. Make applications accessible through multiple channels.
- **Reserve specific percentages of appropriate positions for local residents**, with selection managed through transparent processes involving neutral parties (District Development Coordinators, civil society representatives, community leaders together).
- **Implement skills development programs** that

<sup>13</sup> Invictus Energy Limited. INFRASTRUCTURE: Improving infrastructure that enables community wellbeing and economic prosperity is a key focus of our corporate social responsibility programs. <https://www.invictusenergy.com/sustainability/> accessed February 3, 2026.

build local capacity for technical positions over time, creating advancement pathways rather than static employment tiers.

- **Report publicly on employment statistics** disaggregated by origin (local vs. external), gender, and position type, demonstrating commitment through measurable outcomes.

Current patterns – where only two Mbire residents and a few Muzarabani residents secured employment at project sites – undermine social license and waste local human capital. Transparent systems serve both equity and operational goals by accessing local talent while building community support.

#### **4.4 INVEST STRATEGICALLY IN CLIMATE ADAPTATION AND ESSENTIAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

The acute infrastructure deficits and climate vulnerabilities documented require immediate attention. Strategic investments should include:

##### **Climate Adaptation and Environmental Protection:**

- Flood early warning systems and risk management infrastructure addressing the high vulnerability documented (70%+ of Mbire households)
- Sustainable water management and irrigation schemes to reduce dependence on increasingly erratic rainfall
- Reforestation and environmental restoration programs addressing deforestation from firewood collection and project land clearing
- Support for climate-resilient agriculture (like sesame cultivation) with guaranteed market access

##### **Transportation Infrastructure:**

- Completion of the abandoned Mahuwe-Kanyemba road or alternative routes, addressing both community mobility and operational logistics needs
- All-weather access roads connecting communities to healthcare, education and other critical facilities

##### **Education Infrastructure:**

- Classroom blocks and sanitation facilities for schools in identified high-need areas (Madzomba, Nyambudzi)
- Support for teacher recruitment and retention to address truancy undermining educational quality
- Secondary school development reduces travel distances that contribute to dropouts

##### **Healthcare Services:**

- Upgrading existing clinics with essential equipment and reliable medicine supplies
- Construction of new healthcare facilities in underserved wards
- Reliable ambulance and emergency response systems

##### **Energy Access:**

- Subsidised cleaner energy alternatives (solar, gas) for low-income households, demonstrating direct project benefits
- National grid infrastructure improvements are enhancing reliability
- Support for transition away from environmentally harmful firewood dependence

These investments should be understood as essential components of responsible resource extraction that address pre-existing vulnerabilities rather than exacerbating them. Addressing them creates immediate value for communities while building foundations for long-term operational success.

## 5. CONCLUSION

### FROM RESOURCE CURSE TO SHARED PROSPERITY

Zimbabwe's extractive sector history demonstrates that natural resource wealth does not automatically translate into community development. The Marange diamond fields, where communities were forcibly removed and securitisation led to human rights abuses<sup>14</sup>, represent patterns that must not be repeated in Mbire and Muzarabani.

The Cabora Bassa project's current transitional period – following the recent developments with Al Mansour Holdings – creates an important time to establish robust governance frameworks before any intensified extraction occurs. The four recommendations outlined address gaps identified through extensive community research while aligning with international best practices in responsible mining.

These recommendations are neither aspirational nor punitive – they are practical necessities for avoiding social conflict, environmental degradation, and perpetuation of poverty amid resource wealth. They reflect what communities have clearly articulated as their priorities and expectations.

For Invictus Energy or any future partner, these recommendations offer a roadmap to a genuine social license built on trust, transparency, and shared benefit. For the Government of Zimbabwe, they provide frameworks for fulfilling Constitutional obligations while demonstrating that natural resource governance can advance inclusive development.

The communities of Mbire and Muzarabani should not become another case study in extractive industries enriching elites, while local residents remain impoverished. With deliberate policy choices guided by community priorities and informed by evidence, these districts can demonstrate that natural resource wealth can genuinely improve citizens' lives – when governance structures prioritise transparency, accountability, and inclusive participation.

<sup>14</sup> Hove M, Nyamunda T, Mukwambo P (2014), "Violent state operations at Chiadzwa (Zimbabwe) diamond fields 2006-2009". *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research*, Vol. 6 No. 1 pp. 56-75, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JACPR-11-2012-0014>



**ABOVE:** A poultry farmer, arranges eggs at her market stall after transporting them on her renewable energy electrical tricycle designed for a rural off-road environments.

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