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SHIFTING POWER IN THE LITHIUM BOOM-AN ALTERNATIVE STORY OF LITHIUM MINING COMMUNITIES IN THE ENERGY TRANSITION -LESSONS FROM BIKITA, ZIMBABWE

Community-corporate engagement facilitated by
AAZ under the Zimbabwe Accountability and Citizen
Engagement (ZIMACE) Project as an accountability
platform, Ward 32 Bikita in December 2025.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHY THIS CASE MATTERS

This case study examines how mining-induced relocation associated with lithium expansion in **Bikita District, Zimbabwe**, evolved from a potentially forced displacement into a negotiated process shaped by community participation, accountability, and rights-based engagement. It demonstrates the critical role of civil society action in influencing extractive sector development to ensure that mining activities linked to the energy transition do not disproportionately disadvantage vulnerable and marginalised communities.



The case concerns eight households that settled on a mining claim between 1999 and 2000 under Zimbabwe's Fast-Track Land Reform Programme. Despite the absence of formal land tenure, these households had established permanent homes, livelihood systems, and social networks for more than two decades. In 2022, the expansion of Bikita Minerals triggered relocation pressures, unfolding within a context characterised by weak tenure protection and limited access to effective grievance mechanisms. There were also pronounced power asymmetries

between the mining company and affected communities.

Through sustained civil society engagement, the relocation process shifted from unilateral decision-making towards negotiated and more equitable outcomes. The experience illustrates how rights awareness, mediation, and accountability mechanisms can rebalance power relations and reshape extractive encounters, contributing to more just and inclusive approaches to mining-related resettlement in the context of critical mineral extraction.

STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

INFORMALITY AND POWER ASYMMETRIES

Zimbabwe's land reform programme resulted in settlements occurring across multiple land-use categories, including land legally designated for mining. Although tenure regularisation processes were subsequently applied to many beneficiaries on agricultural land, households on mining claims have generally remained outside formal tenure and protection frameworks, leaving them exposed to displacement and without clear remedial pathways.

In Bikita District, eight families settled at George Nollen Farm under the authority of Chief Marozva and coexisted with limited mining activity for many years.

The subsequent expansion of lithium extraction, driven by growing global demand for energy-transition minerals, intensified land-use pressures in the area. At the same time, statutory compensation and grievance mechanisms remained largely inaccessible, owing to the households' lack of formal land title. This produced a familiar extractive dynamic within the energy transition context: as mining imperatives increasingly took precedence, community livelihoods became more exposed to disruption, while formal systems proved inadequate in providing effective, accessible pathways for grievance redress or negotiated resolution.

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ACTIONAID ZIMBABWE'S PROGRAMME DNA IN PRACTICE



Vimbayi Musikavanhu ZIMACE Project Officer
facilitating community corporate dialogue in
Ward 2 of Bikita in December 2025.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION, A CORNERSTONE OF RESPONSIBLE MINING: REFRAMING “ILLEGALITY”

Engagement in Bikita was grounded in an alternative interpretation of the situation—one that reframed notions of “illegality” by recognising long-standing occupation, livelihood dependence, and the policy contexts that had produced informality. This reframing shifted the focus of engagement away from enforcement-based responses towards negotiated

solutions that prioritised human welfare and dignity.

By foregrounding lived realities rather than narrow legal status, the process created space for relocation approaches that extended beyond procedural compliance and more substantively addressed the social impacts and legacies of land reform.

BUILDING BRIDGES, MOBILE HUMAN RIGHTS CLINICS AS CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE: MEANINGFUL CONSULTATION AND RIGHTS AWARENESS



Victoria Mtomba, Public Relations Officer at Sinomine Bikita Minerals, outlining the company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives as an accountability effort in Ward 32, Bikita - December 2025.

Affected households were supported by civil society actors, notably ActionAid Zimbabwe, to engage collectively and articulate how land loss would affect farming systems, grazing access, household income, and social networks. Consultation processes moved beyond one-way information sharing to enable communities to interrogate proposed relocation packages and to explain why standardised solutions—such as uniform two-bedroom housing—were insufficient to restore livelihoods or social cohesion.

Rights awareness was strengthened through Mobile Human Rights Clinics (MHRCs) delivered by the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC), with facilitation support from ActionAid

Zimbabwe. The MHRCs provided accessible legal information, clarified entitlements and limitations, and offered independent mediation. They were designed to bring human rights services closer to mining-affected communities while systematically documenting business and human rights concerns within the extractive sector. Through this process, communities were capacitated to understand and utilise grievance redress mechanisms, enabling them to demand accountability from mining companies and relevant public authorities.

The MHRCs provided real-time responses to community complaints, enhanced access to justice for individuals affected by environmental and social harm, and

strengthened coordination among local stakeholders, including Rural District Councils (RDCs), the Environmental Management Agency (EMA), and traditional leadership structures. In structured engagements with ZHRC officers, residents were able to formally present their grievances, which were subsequently taken up with the mining company. For many participants, this

marked the first time their experiences were acknowledged within an official process, transforming abstract compliance issues into lived human realities.

As a result, affected households engaged with relocation decisions as informed participants rather than passive recipients, contributing to more negotiated and socially responsive outcomes.

A GROWING SHIFT TOWARD INCLUSIVE, RIGHTS-BASED MINING GOVERNANCE.




ZHRC Commissioner Professor Dziva, two other ZHRC provincial coordinators together with ActionAid team interacting with affected families during pre-relocation consultative meetings in Bikita.

Engagement with government ministries, local authorities, traditional leadership, and Bikita Minerals contributed to a substantive shift in how relocation was approached. High-level engagements culminated in the participation of the Minister of State for Provincial Affairs and Devolution and the Chairperson of Commissioners of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (ZHRC) in mining relocation dialogues with Sinomine Bikita Minerals. These dialogues, jointly facilitated by ActionAid Zimbabwe, increasingly emphasised structured engagement, transparency, and independent oversight, thereby reducing the risk of coercive or unilateral displacement.

As the mining company began to recognise the legitimacy of the concerns raised, families initially characterised as “illegal settlers” were brought into structured, participatory relocation discussions. This process resulted in Sinomine’s agreement to compensate the affected households, with the proposed compensation package currently under review by the mine’s investors. This shift reflects growing institutional trust and alignment with ActionAid Zimbabwe’s rights-based approach, achieved through sustained and strategic engagement with stakeholders across local, provincial, and national levels.

The Bikita case study now stands as a potential best-practice model for managing mining-induced relocation in the context of critical mineral extraction. It offers important lessons for mining companies, policymakers, and development practitioners, underscoring that corporate responsibility extends beyond harm minimisation to include meaningful listening, responsiveness, and accountability to affected communities.

Building on insights generated through Mobile Human Rights Clinics and community dialogues, ActionAid Zimbabwe is developing a policy proposal for a national framework on legal compensation and grievance redress in mining-induced relocations. The proposed framework emphasises strengthened land tenure security, institutionalised legal aid, inclusive and participatory stakeholder engagement, and alignment with national and international human rights standards.



**The Bikita case study
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VII POWER SHIFTS

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE



ActionAid team interacting with chairperson of the mining community Rural Women Assembly.

The Bikita experience illustrates how power can be rebalanced within extractive contexts. Dominant narratives that equate the absence of formal title with an absence of rights were effectively challenged, creating space for more inclusive interpretations of entitlement and responsibility. Decision-making processes that had previously excluded affected communities were opened through mediation, district-level platforms, and structured multi-stakeholder engagement.

These shifts translated into tangible outcomes, including revised relocation approaches and the formal inclusion of households that had previously been overlooked. Collectively, the case demonstrates how deliberate facilitation, accountability mechanisms, and rights-based engagement can reshape extractive decision-making in ways that are more equitable, transparent, and socially responsive.

DIFFERENTIATED RELOCATION OUTCOMES

Rather than applying a single, uniform relocation model, differentiated responses emerged. In areas where land was not immediately required, temporary co-existence arrangements were negotiated. Where relocation was unavoidable, support was provided in kind, including housing structures and construction materials, alongside transitional assistance.

At the same time, the process revealed persistent limitations. Flat-rate assistance and standardised housing designs did not fully reflect household-specific needs, livelihood systems, or cultural practices. This underscored the continuing gap between mining-related community investments and the requirements for meaningful livelihood restoration and social recovery.

INTERSECTIONALITY: CORRECTING GENDERED EXCLUSION



Vimbayi Musikavanhu
ZIMACE Project
Officer (right)
speaking with one
of the affected
women.

One female-headed household was initially excluded from the relocation process, reflecting the intersection of informal tenure arrangements and patriarchal norms common in mining-affected contexts. Through verification and

targeted engagement, this exclusion was subsequently addressed, underscoring the importance of critically examining who is omitted from consultation and benefit-sharing processes, and the structural factors that drive such exclusion.

REDISTRIBUTION, RESILIENCE, AND LIVELIHOOD RECOVERY

In the context of lithium extraction for the energy transition, the shift from cash-based responses to in-kind assistance—particularly housing and transitional support—reduced immediate vulnerability and lowered the risk of households

returning to mining areas. While challenges to full livelihood restoration persist, this approach contributed to improved short-term stability and enhanced adaptive capacity among affected families.



Anna Madzivadondo and Sharon Mukaka from Bikita showcase their entrepreneurial spirit, selling scouring powder provided by Sinomine Bikita Minerals as part of the company's corporate social responsibility initiative.

The Bikita case sits at the intersection of climate justice, economic justice, and public service reform agenda. Lithium extraction for the energy transition exposed gaps in land governance, grievance systems, and relocation policy. Lessons

from the case have informed advocacy for clearer relocation frameworks, recognition of informal occupiers, differentiated assistance models, and locally rooted grievance mechanisms within public institutions.

CONCLUSION

AN ALTERNATIVE STORY OF MINING

The Bikita experience shows that the energy transition does not have to reproduce extractive injustice. When communities are supported to engage, when accountability mechanisms are activated, and when power is negotiated rather than imposed, mining linked to transition minerals can move closer to justice.

This case study offers a grounded alternative story: a transition that centres people, livelihoods, and dignity alongside global climate goals.





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