POLICY BRIEF: RECLAIMING ZIMBABWE’S MINERAL WEALTH FOR A FEMINIST, JUST TRANSITION

Photo: ActionAid Zimbabwe

THE CHALLENGE: REIMAGINING ZIMBABWE’S MINERAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT FOR COMMUNITY BENEFIT

For too long, the dominant global economic system —colonial, extractive, and patriarchal—has treated Africa’s natural resources as objects for plunder, not as a foundation for its people’s well-being. Zimbabwe is a stark example of this experience: a country rich in mineral wealth, yet whose communities on the front-lines of extraction face deepening poverty in the face of an accelerating climate crisis.

The extractive industry is the backbone of Zimba- bwe’s economy, accounting for 80% of export earnings and 13% of GDP. This mineral wealth, including strategic resources such as lithium, that are vital for the global green transition, should be the engine for a just and sustainable future for all Zimbabweans. Systemic challenges within the country’s fiscal and legal frameworks hinder effective domestic resource mobilisation and fail to adequately address illicit financial flows, which continue to perpetuate inequalities. Additionally, the presence of opaque contracts and secretive agreements, and over generous tax incentives for multinational corporations further complicates efforts to enhance domestic resource mobilization. According to Zimbabwe’s Financial Intelligence Unit[i], the nation loses an estimated US$1.5 billion annually through illicit flows alone. These funds could be channelled towards public services and ambitious climate action.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Introduce a Polluter Pays Principle: The Green Tax.
2. Dismantle Opacity and Strengthen Public Accountability.
3. End Harmful Subsidies; Incentivise Real Climate Action.
4. Reclaim Mineral Revenue for Climate Justice.
5. Empower Artisanal Miners, Secure the Supply Chain.
6. Centre Communities: Mandate Benefit Sharing and Consent.
7. Lead the Charge for Global Climate Justice and Reparations.

This reflects a systemic challenge within a framework that often prioritises corporate interests over the well-being of individuals and the environment. Consequently, there is significant underfunding of public services and climate initiatives, which disproportionately impacts women, youth, and marginalised communities, leaving them to navigate the dual challenges of ecological degradation and economic constraints.

Extractive industry policy should be harmonised with the priorities of ambitious climate action, which will promote sustainable and inclusive growth. Zimbabwe can unlock billions of dollars of domestic resources towards climate action by reforming fiscal policies, increasing transparency, mobilizing novel climate finance for climate and institutional capacity building. However, domestic resource mobilisation must come in addition to the trillions the Global North owes the Global South, and very much not instead of.

A genuine feminist and just transition necessitates a dual approach to justice. At the national level, Zimbabwe must reclaim stewardship of its mineral resources, empowering local communities and shifting decision-making from corporate entities to the people. Globally, this must be complemented by demanding the climate debt owed by the wealthy, polluting nations of the global north who fuelled this crisis. This is not about patching up a broken system; it demands fundamental system change, both at home and abroad. The following policy recommendations are not merely technical adjustments; they represent essential steps toward transforming the current extractive model. By prioritising Zimbabwe's resources, alongside climate reparations, these recommendations aim to support climate justice and foster a resilient future for all citizens.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYSTEM CHANGE.

To advance this dual approach to justice, the Government of Zimbabwe is encouraged to take decisive measures both domestically and on the international stage:

1. INTRODUCE A POLLUTER PAYS PRINCIPLE: THE GREEN TAX.

Our planet and people can no longer subsidise corporate pollution. An environmental (Green) tax must be introduced for all mining operations with proven negative environmental impacts. This tax, based on the scale of ecological damage, would create a needed financial disincentive for harmful practices and generate a dedicated revenue stream for climate action. This non-deductible tax is enabled by Section 135(b) of the Environmental Management Act (Chapter 20:27) and its revenue must be deposited directly into the Environmental Fund, ensuring it is ring-fenced to remediate damaged ecosystems and build community resilience.

2. DISMANTLE OPACITY AND STRENGTHEN PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY.

To challenge the hidden power of corporations, the government must establish a technical inter-agency committee (involving Ministries of Finance and Mines, Parliament, ZIDA, ZIMRA, EMA) to negotiate all major mining contracts, ending the era of secretive deals. Furthermore, a public beneficial ownership register for the entire mining sector is non-negotiable. This must be coupled with mandating Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) disclosure for all companies—not just the 22.7% of major firms currently listed on local stock exchanges that have some reporting requirements. Lack of transparency in mining contracts and revenue management facilitates corruption, illicit financial flows, and revenue loss. Publicly available data on beneficial ownership and ESG performance allows for greater scrutiny from parliament and civil society, holding both government and corporations accountable.

3. END HARMFUL SUBSIDIES; INCENTIVISE REAL CLIMATE ACTION.

All fiscal incentives must be explicitly tied to verifiable environmental performance and concrete climate actions. Generous Special Mining Leases (SMLs), which currently last for 25 years with no climate or social conditions, must be reduced to a maximum of 10 years and be conditional on performance. For example, due to its SML, ZIMPLATS' income tax payment in 2023 was US$4.3 million lower than it would have been at the standard rate which shows a direct loss to public funds. All incentives must undergo regular, public cost-benefit analyses to eliminate those that drain the public purse without delivering justice.

4. RECLAIM MINERAL REVENUE FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE.

The Treasury must be legally required to allocate a specific, significant percentage of all extractive sector revenue to a ring-fenced Environmental Fund for climate initiatives. Currently, revenue from the carbon tax is absorbed into the Consolidated Revenue Fund and disappears. This is a betrayal of the tax's purpose. Between 2019-2023, carbon tax revenue averaged 1.02% of total government

Photo: ActionAid Zimbabwe

revenue, yet environmental protection received a pathetic 0.27% of the national budget. For every dollar raised for climate action, less than 27 cents were spent on it. This must end.

5. EMPOWER ARTISANAL MINERS, SECURE THE SUPPLY CHAIN.

The artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector, where a significant number of women and youth find their livelihoods, must be formalised with dignity and purpose. The Ministry of Mines must enact simplified laws that make registration accessible, provide support for safe and environmentally sound practices, and protect miners from exploitation. Formalisation is not just about curbing revenue leakage; it is about recognizing and empowering a vital part of the economy and ensuring miners' rights are protected.

6. CENTRE COMMUNITIES: MANDATE BENEFIT SHARING AND CONSENT.

Communities at the forefront of extraction are active participants and rightful stakeholders. It is essential to establish Community Share Ownership Trusts (CSOTs) as a requirement for all large-scale mining operations to ensure that local communities directly benefit from the resources in their localities as per Section 13(4) of the Zimbabwean Constitution.

Critically, Parliament must codify the right to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) into national law, guaranteeing communities the power to give or withhold consent for projects that affect their lives and livelihoods. This is a fundamental step in shifting power and ensuring a truly just transition.

7. LEAD THE CHARGE FOR GLOBAL CLIMATE JUSTICE AND REPARATIONS.

Domestic initiatives must be complemented by a commitment to global justice. The Government of Zimbabwe must advocate for climate reparations from the Global North, acknowledging the historical contributions to the current crisis. In international forums, including the UNFCCC and the African Union, Zimbabwe is recommended to reject climate finance in the form of loans that exacerbate debt and instead pursue unconditional, grant-based funding along with comprehensive debt cancellation. This approach reflects a recognition of the obligations owed to the people of Zimbabwe and the Global South.

Endnotes

[i] US$1,5 billion lost through illicit financial flows – FIU - The Financial Gazette

The Extractive Sector Research Series spans across Liberia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Zambia and Kenya uncovering how natural resource extraction is an opportunity for a feminist and just transition.

The series is part of ActionAid Denmark's Global Program on Climate Justice, and will be recurring, deepening the evidence and momentum for lasting change.

WRITERS: Happymore Chibvura

CONTRIBUTERS: Abel Sibanda and Harriet Mackaill-Hill

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