



**Extractivism, the Environment, and Land Rights in the Nickel Mining Sector of Zambia**

**Chipo Kufuna<sup>1&2</sup> & Nixon Chisonga<sup>3&4\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of Development Studies, University of Zambia, Zambia

<sup>2</sup>Chikankata Town Council, Zambian Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development

<sup>3</sup>School of Postgraduate Studies, University of Lusaka, Zambia

<sup>4</sup>School of Social Sciences, Social Development Department, Mulungushi University, Zambia

\*E-Mail: [nixon.chisonga@gmail.com](mailto:nixon.chisonga@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** *This study examined the environmental, social, and economic implications of nickel mining in Zambia, with a focus on sustainable land use, tenure security, and community livelihoods. Guided by three objectives, the research assessed the environmental impacts of nickel mining, particularly land degradation, water quality, and broader ecosystem effects; explored how land acquisition and resettlement practices have influenced tenure security and community rights; and explored the socio-economic outcomes of mining in terms of employment, income generation, and equitable benefit distribution. The study adopted a qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews with community members, civic leaders, and affected households. Thematic analysis was employed to identify emerging patterns and perspectives. The findings revealed that nickel mining has exacerbated environmental challenges, including poor water access, soil degradation, and cracks in houses due to blasting. Resettlement processes disrupted tenure security, with inadequate housing, poor infrastructure, and unfulfilled promises of social services, leading to worsening poverty among displaced households. Socio-economic benefits were limited, with employment opportunities being inaccessible to locals due to nepotism and external recruitment. Overall, the study concludes that nickel mining has contributed more to environmental damage and community marginalization than to sustainable local development.*

**Keywords:** *Nickel mining, resettlement, livelihoods, environment, tenure security*

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## **1. Introduction**

Zambia's political economy has long been shaped by mineral extraction, with copper historically forming the backbone of national revenue, and more recently nickel emerging as a

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strategic resource in the country's economic diversification agenda (Mwitwa, German, Muimba-Kankolongo, & Puntodewo, 2012). Since independence, mining has dominated Zambia's export earnings and fiscal revenue, providing the government with substantial capacity to implement development projects while simultaneously exposing the economy to the volatility of global commodity markets (World Bank, 2019). Despite its celebrated role as an engine of growth, the mining sector has often fallen short of delivering inclusive development outcomes, particularly in rural and peri-urban communities located near mining operations. These communities frequently bear the brunt of extractive activities, experiencing land dispossession, social dislocation, and environmental degradation, even as national economic indicators record growth (Chinene, Maimbo, Banda, & Msune, 2024; Moyo, 2007). The paradox of resource-led development in Zambia, therefore, mirrors broader patterns in sub-Saharan Africa, where extractivist models of growth often generate profound social and ecological tensions.

The concept of extractivism provides a critical lens for understanding these dynamics. Extractivism denotes the large-scale removal of natural resources for export, primarily geared toward meeting external market demands rather than fostering local development or diversification (Alonso-Fradejas, 2021). In practice, extractivist projects are characterized by limited downstream processing, weak linkages to domestic industries, and highly uneven distribution of economic benefits. Beyond economic inequities, extractivism is associated with severe environmental impacts, including deforestation, soil erosion, water pollution, and the depletion of arable land (Moyo, 2007; Shivji, 2009). The expansion of mining into areas governed by customary land regimes intensifies conflicts over tenure security, as statutory mining licenses often override community-based landholding systems, undermining livelihoods, cultural practices, and local governance structures (Nzara, 2018). Such tensions reflect the persistent contradictions of capitalist resource exploitation, where patterns of dispossession and accumulation resemble a contemporary form of primitive accumulation, what Moyo, et al., (2012) describe as a "new scramble" for African resources, driven by both global and semi-peripheral actors seeking to extract surplus from local populations while reshaping land and labor relations.

The Munali Nickel Mine in Mazabuka District exemplifies these tensions in Zambia. Commissioned in the late 2000s, the mine was positioned as an opportunity to diversify the national mineral base beyond copper, yet its operations rapidly became entangled in disputes over land acquisition, resettlement compensation, and environmental management (Mungu, The relationship between mining and local community development: The case of Munali nickel mine in Southern Zambia, 2017). While some resettled households benefited from expanded landholdings or improved infrastructure, others experienced insecure tenure, diminished agricultural productivity, and relocation to environmentally unsuitable areas. These divergent outcomes illustrate the uneven social and economic benefits of extractivist projects, highlighting the limits of Zambia's mineral-led development paradigm when confronted with customary tenure systems and vulnerable local ecologies (Chinyemba & Simbeye, 2025). The Munali case thus provides a lens to interrogate broader governance questions: how statutory and customary institutions mediate resource extraction, the socio-environmental trade-offs

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involved, and the mechanisms through which communities negotiate rights and livelihoods amidst capitalist accumulation pressures.

Despite growing recognition of these challenges, significant knowledge gaps remain in understanding the intersection of land rights, environmental sustainability, and socio-economic benefits in Zambia's mining sector. Existing studies have predominantly focused either on macroeconomic contributions of mining (Bebbington, et al., 2018; World Bank, 2019) or on environmental impacts in isolation (Alonso-Fradejas, 2021). Less attention has been paid to the structural processes through which extractive capital shapes land tenure security, environmental integrity, and local livelihoods concurrently, particularly in the context of semi-peripheral accumulation dynamics and globalized mineral markets (Moyo, et al., 2012). This study addresses this gap by examining the Munali Nickel Mine as a case study, seeking to generate insights on the systemic mechanisms of resource dispossession, environmental degradation, and uneven socio-economic outcomes.

The research is guided by three interrelated objectives. First, it aims to assess the environmental impacts of nickel mining in Mazabuka, focusing on land degradation, water quality, and broader ecosystem effects that influence sustainable land use. Second, it examines how land acquisition and resettlement practices affect tenure security and community rights, exploring the linkage between statutory regulations and customary landholding arrangements. Third, it investigates the socio-economic outcomes of mining, including employment, income generation, and the equitable distribution of benefits, to understand the broader implications for local development and livelihoods. By addressing these objectives, the study situates the Munali experience within broader debates on extractivism, resource governance, and community resilience, highlighting the tensions and opportunities inherent in Zambia's mineral-based development model.

Ultimately, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly and policy discussions on the governance of mineral wealth in Africa, foregrounding the lived experiences of affected communities alongside institutional and policy analyses. By critically engaging with issues of land rights, environmental sustainability, and socio-economic justice, this research advances knowledge on how extractivist economies can be reconciled with equitable and sustainable development, offering lessons for Zambia and other resource-dependent countries across the continent.

## **2. Conceptual & Theoretical Underpinnings**

Extractivism as a critical concept emerges from political ecology, ecological economics, and Latin American dependency theory, where it has been employed to describe modes of resource exploitation tied to global capitalist expansion (Acosta, 2017; Bebbington et al., 2018; Durante et al., 2021). Unlike narrow accounts of mining as an economic activity, extractivism is understood as a structural condition: it positions resource-rich but industrially peripheral economies like Zambia as suppliers of unprocessed raw materials for metropolitan centers of

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accumulation. This creates what Warnecke-Berger and Ickler (2025) describe as *enclave economies*, islands of intensive capital extraction within broader landscapes of marginalization.

At its core, extractivism embodies a paradox. On the one hand, mining generates foreign exchange and contributes to national GDP, aligning with Zambia's diversification agenda; on the other, its gains are distributed unevenly, with disproportionate costs borne by rural communities adjacent to mining sites (World Bank, 2019). The case of the Munali Nickel Mine in Mazabuka exemplifies this tension. Its reopening in 2008 was celebrated as a milestone for Zambia's re-entry into global nickel markets, yet it also introduced disputes over land acquisition, displacement, and ecological damage. Such contradictions reveal extractivism as a deeply political phenomenon, entangled with questions of land rights, environmental justice, and community livelihoods (Mungu, 2017).

To explore further these dynamics, this study employs Marx's theory of Primitive Accumulation as its sole theoretical anchor. This framework provides the critical tools to examine how extractive projects like Munali reproduce capitalist relations through dispossession, coercion, and the restructuring of land and labor systems.

Marx (1867/1976) developed the concept of primitive accumulation to explain the violent historical processes that facilitated the rise of capitalism. Contrary to liberal accounts that portrayed capitalism as the outcome of gradual thrift and trade, Marx argued that it emerged through coercive expropriation of the peasantry, forced separation of producers from means of subsistence, and legal codification of private property. Primitive accumulation was not simply an economic shift but a political and social transformation underpinned by violence, law, and state power (Ekman, 2012).

While rooted in the historical enclosure of common lands in Europe, primitive accumulation has been extended by contemporary scholars to analyze ongoing dispossession in the Global South. Harvey (2003) reconceptualized it as accumulation by dispossession, showing that capitalism continually requires fresh frontiers of expropriation to sustain accumulation. Further demonstrating how state power, international capital, and local elites orchestrate these processes, often through legal reforms, privatization, and securitization (Fontes, 2017).

In the Zambian context, primitive accumulation is evident in the relationship between state mineral governance and customary land tenure. The Mines and Minerals Development Act (1995) empowers the state to allocate mineral rights to corporations, even on customary land, without requiring meaningful consent from affected communities (Chinyemba & Simbeye, 2025). This legal framework reflects the dual role of the state: formally the guardian of national resources but functionally the enabler of corporate access to land. Customary tenure, often undocumented and communally managed, becomes highly vulnerable to encroachment. As Mudenda (2006) argues, compensation schemes rarely capture the cultural, social, and livelihood values embedded in land, reducing dispossession to monetary transactions that inadequately address the depth of community loss.

In the Munali case, households were displaced and resettled under terms framed as development opportunities, yet the underlying dynamic mirrored Marx's description of

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coercion. Here, coercion was not necessarily physical violence but the bureaucratic and legal apparatus that legitimized corporate claims while undermining customary rights. This reflects what Comaroff and Comaroff, (2007) identify as the *violence of law*, the deployment of legal and administrative instruments to render dispossession both lawful and seemingly inevitable.

Thus, primitive accumulation provides the analytical foundation for this study. It situates land dispossession not as incidental to mining but as constitutive of extractivism. It highlights how capital accumulation at Munali was predicated on separating communities from their means of production, land, water, and ecological systems, under the guise of national development. By foregrounding these dynamics, the framework illuminates the structural inequalities and conflicts that define extractive capitalism in Zambia.

### **3. Land and Mining in Zambia: An overview**

The history of mining in Zambia cannot be separated from the country's broader struggles over land, resource governance, and development. Mining has for more than a century shaped Zambia's political economy, subordinating agriculture, restructuring land relations, and entrenching a resource-dependent development model. At its core, Zambia's experience exemplifies the paradoxes of extractivism: mineral wealth has enabled ambitious national projects and periods of prosperity, yet it has also produced cycles of dependency, displacement, ecological degradation, and social inequality.

Zambia's dual identity as both an agrarian society and a mineral-rich state has long been marked by tensions over which sector should form the backbone of development. Prior to the discovery and expansion of copper mining in the early twentieth century, agriculture was the dominant livelihood for the vast majority of Zambians, sustained largely under customary tenure systems and geared towards subsistence farming (Phiri, 2021). The colonial state, however, privileged mining over agriculture, facilitating the development of the Copperbelt through foreign capital while relegating African farmers to marginal lands and labour reserves (Ferguson, 1999).

At independence in 1964, Zambia inherited this structural imbalance. Copper production, concentrated in the Copperbelt, accounted for the bulk of government revenues, foreign exchange earnings, and formal employment (World Bank, 2019). The government's fiscal reliance on mineral rents entrenched the prioritization of mining over agriculture, despite agriculture's central role in food security and rural livelihoods. Policy and public investment were channeled disproportionately towards the mining sector, while agriculture was underfunded, poorly mechanised, and left largely in the domain of customary land tenure (Mudenda, 2006).

The subordination of agriculture to mining has had profound consequences. While mining generated significant state revenue, its enclave character limited linkages to the broader economy (Bebbington et al., 2018). Agriculture, meanwhile, remained underdeveloped and vulnerable, leaving rural communities on the periphery of mineral-led growth. This imbalance

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continues to shape Zambia's development trajectory, reinforcing the dominance of extractivism while undermining efforts at diversification.

The structural dominance of mining was reinforced by the presence of giant mining cooperatives and conglomerates. During the colonial era, two firms, Anglo American Corporation and the Rhodesian Selection Trust, controlled the vast majority of copper production in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), creating a duopolistic structure that monopolised mineral wealth (Chinyemba & Simbeye, 2025). These corporations not only controlled production and exports but also exerted political influence, shaping colonial labour policies, wage structures, and land allocation.

The Copperbelt thus became an economic and political epicentre, drawing migrant labour from across Zambia and neighbouring countries. Mining companies established company towns, controlled housing, health, and education services, and reinforced a paternalistic form of social order that tied workers' lives to corporate structures (Larmer, 2010). While mining created an African working class with strong trade unions, the distribution of benefits remained unequal, with rural areas excluded from the dividends of mining prosperity.

The ascendancy of Kenneth Kaunda after independence marked an attempt to reconfigure this colonial legacy. Under the philosophy of "Zambian Humanism," Kaunda envisioned a developmental state that would mobilise mineral rents for social and economic transformation. The Mines and Minerals Development Act of 1969 was a turning point, transferring control of mineral rights to the state and paving the way for the nationalisation of mining assets. By the mid-1970s, Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines (ZCCM) emerged as the state-owned giant controlling copper production (Chinene et al., 2024).

Nationalisation was celebrated as a reclaiming of sovereignty over natural resources and a mechanism for redistributing wealth. Copper revenues were directed towards expansive social investments: free primary education, subsidised health care, rural electrification, and infrastructure development (Saasa, 2003). Kaunda's government also expanded parastatal enterprises, using mineral rents to diversify into sectors such as manufacturing and transport.

Yet this strategy carried inherent risks. The economy became deeply dependent on copper revenues, accounting for more than 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings by the early 1970s. When global copper prices collapsed in the mid-1970s, Zambia's fiscal base eroded. The overreliance on mining, combined with underinvestment in agriculture, exposed the structural fragility of the extractivist model (Acosta, 2017). Although mining wealth initially financed redistribution, the absence of sustained agricultural development left rural communities marginalised, widening the urban-rural divide.

By the 1980s, Zambia faced mounting debt, fiscal crises, and economic stagnation. The state's inability to sustain ZCCM operations, coupled with pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, ushered in neoliberal structural adjustment policies. The 1990s marked the era of privatisation, where ZCCM assets were sold off at undervalued rates to foreign investors (Fraser & Lungu, 2007).

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This wave of privatisation reversed the gains of nationalisation. Mining revenues to the state plummeted as new investors negotiated tax holidays, royalty exemptions, and profit repatriation agreements. For instance, mining companies often paid royalties as low as 0.6 percent, among the lowest in the world, undermining Zambia's fiscal sovereignty (Chinyemba & Simbeye, 2025). While privatisation restored production capacity and attracted foreign capital, it eroded the state's developmental role and weakened its ability to capture mineral rents for social investment.

The return of multinational dominance also reconfigured labour relations. Workforce retrenchments accompanied privatisation, undermining trade unions and eroding worker protections. Communities that had once benefitted from ZCCM's social services were left vulnerable, as private mining companies dismantled the welfare functions previously provided by the state-owned enterprise (Larmer, 2010).

Land has been a recurring arena of conflict in Zambia's mining history. The country's dual tenure system, statutory and customary, has created enduring tensions. While statutory law grants the state ownership of all minerals, customary tenure governs the land on which most rural Zambians live and farm. This arrangement has created structural vulnerabilities: communities with insecure tenure rights are frequently displaced when mining concessions are issued, often without adequate consultation or compensation (Chu, 2015).

The Mines and Minerals Development Act of 1995 codified the supremacy of mining rights, enabling corporations to acquire land even in customary areas. Communities displaced under such arrangements often faced development-induced displacement, losing not only their land but also their cultural and livelihood bases. Compensation packages were frequently inadequate, reflecting the commodification of land rather than its broader social and ecological value (Mudenda, 2006).

The Munali Nickel Mine in Mazabuka exemplifies these dynamics. Located in a predominantly agricultural district, the mine's establishment required significant land acquisition, displacing farming households and disrupting agricultural production. While some resettled households received larger plots or improved infrastructure, others reported insecure tenure, reduced productivity, and unsuitable relocation sites. Such uneven outcomes highlight the contradictions of extractivist development, where national economic gains often come at the expense of local livelihoods.

Mining in Zambia has left a profound environmental footprint. Copper, cobalt, and nickel extraction have contributed to deforestation, soil erosion, water contamination, and air pollution. Mining towns such as Kitwe, Mufulira, and Kabwe remain symbols of environmental injustice. Kabwe, in particular, has been identified as one of the most polluted towns in the world, with lead contamination affecting generations of residents (UN-Habitat, 2017). The long-term health consequences, respiratory illnesses, neurological damage, and waterborne diseases, represent what Nixon (2011) terms "slow violence," where harm accumulates invisibly over time.

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Environmental degradation also intersects with agriculture, as polluted rivers and soils undermine food security and rural livelihoods. Effluents from mining operations contaminate water sources used for irrigation and human consumption, reducing agricultural productivity and increasing public health risks. These ecological impacts illustrate the inseparability of mining from broader environmental justice debates in Zambia.

Successive governments after Kaunda have struggled to balance the imperatives of mining-led growth with the demands of equitable development and ecological sustainability. Efforts to renegotiate development agreements, raise royalty rates, and improve regulatory oversight have often been constrained by weak state capacity, corruption, and corporate lobbying (Durante et al., 2021).

Civil society organisations, faith-based groups, and local movements have increasingly questioned whether Zambia's extractivist model is sustainable. They highlight the persistent issues of inadequate compensation for displaced communities, weak enforcement of environmental standards, and the limited redistributive impact of mining revenues (Warnecke-Berger & Ickler, 2025). At the same time, agriculture remains underdeveloped despite its potential to serve as a foundation for diversification, food security, and rural employment.

The history of land and mining in Zambia reveals a trajectory where mining has consistently superseded agriculture in state policy, fiscal reliance, and national identity. From the colonial dominance of giant mining cooperatives to Kaunda's nationalisation project, the neoliberal privatisation of the 1990s, and contemporary struggles over land tenure and environmental justice, the extractivist model has produced both wealth and precarity.

While mining has financed important social programs and enabled moments of prosperity, it has also entrenched dependency, displacement, and ecological harm. The Munali Nickel Mine in Mazabuka, alongside the broader Copperbelt experience, epitomises the paradoxes of extractivism: wealth creation for some, dispossession and slow violence for others. The unresolved dilemmas of taxation, land rights, and environmental regulation underscore the urgent need for a more balanced development strategy that recognises both the historical significance of mining and the necessity of revitalising agriculture as a pathway to inclusive and sustainable development.

#### **4. Methods**

This study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design, selected for its strength in uncovering social meanings, community experiences, and institutional dynamics that shape the relationship between extractivism, land rights, and environmental change in Zambia. Unlike quantitative approaches that seek numerical generalization, the qualitative design allows for a nuanced and contextual understanding of how the Munali Nickel Mine in Mazabuka has influenced livelihoods, governance, and ecological systems. This orientation is consistent with Creswell's (2014) argument that exploratory qualitative designs are particularly suited for examining under-researched issues in complex socio-political environments.

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The research population was conceptually defined to include communities in Mazabuka directly affected by the Munali Nickel Mine, state institutions responsible for regulating extractive industries, corporate actors involved in mining operations, and civil society organizations engaged in advocacy on land and environmental rights. Given the study's reliance on secondary sources, a purposive sampling strategy was employed to identify a body of texts that best represented these perspectives. The "sample size" thus consisted of 15 interview respondents and a carefully curated set of documents, including Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs), parliamentary records, corporate disclosures, government policy papers, community testimony reports, and peer-reviewed scholarship. Selection was based on relevance, credibility, and capacity to illuminate the study's central themes.

Data collection relied on documentary analysis as the primary interview instrument. Secondary data from peer-reviewed articles from databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar provided the theoretical and empirical foundations of extractivism research, while policy documents and archival records from the Zambia Environmental Management Authority (ZEMA) and the Ministry of Mines offered insights into the regulatory environment. Civil society submissions and community testimony reports provided counter-narratives that highlighted lived experiences often omitted from official accounts. Corporate reports and disclosures were also examined, but critically assessed for silences and selective framing. This wide range of instruments allowed the study to capture diverse voices and institutional standpoints.

For data analysis, the study employed thematic content analysis for both primary and secondary data collection, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Interviews were transcribed and documents were read repeatedly and coded inductively, with recurring issues clustered into themes such as land-use change and displacement, environmental degradation, governance and corporate accountability, and community agency. Through this iterative process, connections and contradictions across different data sources were identified. In order to enhance rigor, triangulation was applied by cross-referencing insights from government, corporate, and civil society documents, consistent with Moon's (2019) methodological emphasis on validating qualitative interpretations.

Throughout the process, the study adopted a critical interpretive stance, recognizing that qualitative data may not be neutral but are shaped by power relations and institutional interests. This lens, informed by political ecology and postcolonial theory, allowed for deeper interrogation of how extractivist narratives are constructed, whose voices are amplified, and whose experiences are marginalized. While the absence of primary fieldwork presents a limitation, it was addressed by drawing extensively on secondary testimonies, independent evaluations, and archival sources that capture local voices.

## **5. Discussion of Results**

This section presents the discussion of findings from interviews conducted with community members living around the Munali Nickel Mine in Mazabuka. The discussion is structured around the three objectives guiding the study and interpreted through thematic analysis.

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Respondents' experiences illuminate how environmental impacts, land and resettlement practices, and socio-economic outcomes intersect in shaping livelihoods and rights in the context of extractivism.

### **5.1 Environmental Impacts of Nickel Mining in Mazabuka**

A consistent theme emerging from the interviews concerns environmental degradation linked to nickel mining operations. Respondents described deteriorating agricultural conditions, inadequate access to clean water, and ecological damage such as soil infertility and house cracks caused by blasting. Respondents 1, 2, and 8 highlighted how farming has become increasingly difficult: *“Over the years, farming has become hard and deteriorating. Our animals graze from far and we have no adequate water... the same place we use to drink water, animals use the same.”* These accounts align with wider studies documenting how mining disrupts agricultural systems through soil depletion, deforestation, and contamination of water resources (Moyo, et al., 2012).

Farmers repeatedly emphasized the decline in soil fertility, with crop yields falling significantly since the onset of mining. Respondents described how farming activities now require greater effort, yet the outcomes remain poor. The replacement of fertile customary land with degraded resettlement areas has led to a situation where communities are unable to sustain their traditional livelihoods. This mirrors evidence from Acosta (2017), who argues that extractivism undermines agrarian economies by prioritizing external demand for minerals over local food systems.

Water emerged as one of the most pressing environmental concerns. Communities reported relying on a single pump for both human and livestock consumption. Although some respondents acknowledged the presence of about six dams, many expressed dissatisfaction with their condition, noting they were poorly built and inadequately maintained: *“The dams were not built properly.”* Such inadequacy exacerbates existing challenges of drought and climate variability, leaving households vulnerable to food and water insecurity. This finding reflects Durante et al. (2021), who emphasize that mining-related water infrastructure projects often fail to meet long-term community needs.

Respondents living closer to the mine reported severe impacts on housing structures, with one noting: *“People who are closer experience house cracks due to mine blasts.”* These structural damages, while not immediately life-threatening, accumulate over time and represent what Nixon (2011) terms “slow violence” environmental harm that erodes communities' resilience in invisible and delayed ways. Beyond structural hazards, blasting also creates dust, noise, and vibrations that further reduce the quality of life.

Underlying these environmental concerns is a shared perception of neglect from both the mine and the government. Respondents like R1 strongly came out: *“There is no help, the mine and the government are not helping.”* This reflects a governance gap, where regulatory bodies fail to enforce environmental safeguards, leaving communities to bear the costs. The contradiction is striking: while the Munali Nickel Mine was promoted as part of Zambia's diversification strategy, its operations have diminished ecological resilience and undermined food security.

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Overall, the environmental impacts show how mining creates a paradox: while contributing to national revenue, it simultaneously erodes the ecological base that sustains local communities.

## **5.2 Land Acquisition, Resettlement, and Tenure Security**

The second objective examined how land acquisition and resettlement have affected tenure security and community rights. The findings show widespread dispossession and precarious outcomes. Respondents emphasized that resettlement disrupted agricultural livelihoods, destroyed social cohesion, and undermined tenure security.

One group of respondents explained: *“We were shifted... we are suffering with the settlement area we were given. Even the roads here are very bad. They removed us from our areas, including our farm lands and our crops are growing badly.”* This reflects a process of coerced displacement, consistent with Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation, where communities are separated from their means of production. The relocation severed ties to fertile lands and replaced them with degraded plots prone to flooding.

Resettlement was characterized by unfulfilled promises. Communities reported being given houses that were already deteriorating: *“These houses are not in good condition now, there are leakages, they have cracks.”* Moreover, critical infrastructure such as electricity and water tanks was never delivered: *“We have no electricity, no water tanks despite this being the promise the mine made.”* This pattern is consistent with Mudenda (2006), who argues that compensation often focuses on symbolic compliance with legal frameworks rather than on meeting displaced communities’ long-term needs.

A recurring grievance concerned the quality of resettlement land. Respondents explained: *“The mine brought more problems, we are unable to farm here, the soil is bad. When it rains, the farms get flooded and crops die.”* Such conditions highlight the gap between statutory approaches to compensation, which focus on plot size, and customary understandings of land as a holistic resource tied to fertility, identity, and livelihood security (Nzara, 2018).

Some respondents noted having legal titles to their land *“This is my land and I have title”* yet their security remains fragile. This shows the dominance of statutory frameworks, such as the Mines and Minerals Development Act (1995), which prioritize mineral rights over customary or individual tenure rights. Even titled landowners face displacement when state and corporate interests align.

Taken together, these findings show that resettlement deepened vulnerability rather than securing sustainable livelihoods. Far from improving living conditions, it entrenched inequalities and marginalized communities under the guise of development.

## **5.3 Socio-Economic Outcomes of Mining**

The third objective investigated the socio-economic effects of mining, focusing on employment, income, and distribution of benefits. The interviews highlighted widespread disillusionment, as initial promises of prosperity gave way to exclusion and precarious livelihoods.

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Respondents consistently expressed frustration at their exclusion from mining jobs. As one explained: *“The people in our village don’t benefit from the jobs in the mines, they recruit people from the Copperbelt. Recruitments are based on corruption and favoritism.”* Civic leaders confirmed their marginal role, limited to casual labor placements. This exclusionary dynamic undermines the legitimacy of the mine and reflects broader governance issues in Zambia’s mining sector.

Although some locals initially gained jobs, these were unstable. Respondents 3, 5, and 7 recalled: *“When the mine started, a lot of people got employed. But over time, a lot lost their jobs.”* Frequent changes in ownership led to retrenchments, forced leave, and delayed payments. As one group explained: *“People have been put on forced leave, others laid off... those lucky are called back.”* This instability mirrors the enclave economy model, where mining creates short-lived opportunities disconnected from sustainable local development (Warnecke-Berger & Ickler, 2025).

Beyond employment, socio-economic contributions were minimal. Respondents recalled that the only meaningful benefits were the construction of a clinic and school during the mine’s establishment: *“The last help they gave was when opening the mine... after that no help has come.”* This reflects a one-off, compliance-driven approach to corporate social responsibility, rather than sustained community investment (Fraser & Lungu, 2007).

Instead of alleviating poverty, mining-induced resettlement forced households into precarious labor markets. Displaced people often resorted to low-paid farm work: *“People are forced to go work in farms owned by the whites to make ends meet.”* This demonstrates how mining can worsen rather than improve living standards, creating cycles of dependency and downward mobility.

The findings also highlight unequal outcomes. A small minority benefited from employment or slightly better land allocations, while the majority reported worsening poverty. This reflects the extractivist pattern where profits are captured by corporations, elites, and external actors, while local communities shoulder the social and environmental costs (Bebbington et al., 2018).

#### **5.4 Synthesis**

Across the three objectives, the findings show a coherent pattern: the Munali Nickel Mine has imposed significant environmental costs, undermined tenure security through resettlement, and delivered limited socio-economic benefits to local communities. Rather than enabling sustainable and inclusive development, the mine has reproduced the contradictions of extractivism, growth for the national economy but dispossession and precarity for host communities.

Through the lens of primitive accumulation, these outcomes reflect the structural logic of extractivism in Zambia: state-backed resource extraction that prioritizes corporate access over community rights, displaces local livelihoods, and externalizes environmental costs. The Munali case exemplifies how capitalist accumulation requires not only physical resources but also the reconfiguration of land, labor, and ecological systems, often at the expense of marginalized rural populations.

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These findings reinforce calls for rethinking Zambia's mineral-led development model. Without stronger regulatory frameworks, meaningful community participation, and equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms, extractivist projects will continue to reproduce cycles of dispossession, inequality, and ecological harm. The challenge, therefore, lies in reconciling resource extraction with environmental justice, land rights, and socio-economic inclusivity.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study explored the environmental, social, and economic impacts of nickel mining in Mazabuka, with the aim of understanding how mining activities intersect with sustainable land use, community rights, and local development. The findings have shown a complex reality in which the anticipated benefits of mining are overshadowed by its adverse consequences on the environment, tenure security, and socio-economic well-being of local communities. From an environmental perspective, the evidence demonstrated that mining operations have significantly contributed to land degradation, water scarcity, and broader ecosystem disruptions. Farmers in the study area reported declining soil fertility, reduced crop yields, and the collapse of grazing opportunities, making agricultural livelihoods increasingly unsustainable. Water resources, shared between humans and livestock, were inadequate and poorly managed, with some communities relying on a single pump or makeshift dams for survival. Furthermore, the blasting activities associated with mining were linked to the physical destruction of houses, further eroding the quality of life for communities living in proximity to the mine.

On the social dimension, the study highlighted how resettlement and land acquisition practices undermined tenure security and disrupted community livelihoods. While some households were given houses upon resettlement, these were poorly constructed, lacking basic amenities such as electricity and water tanks, and have since deteriorated with cracks, leakages, and structural weaknesses. More importantly, resettlement not only stripped people of their original lands but also displaced them into areas with poor soil quality and inadequate infrastructure, leaving them worse off than before. The unfulfilled promises of social support services, including better roads, water facilities, and electricity, have further entrenched discontent among communities. The sense of neglect and betrayal by both the mine and government institutions has fueled a perception of dispossession and marginalization, thereby intensifying the vulnerability of resettled households.

Economically, the study found that the benefits of nickel mining were not equitably shared. Employment opportunities were limited and often inaccessible to local residents due to corruption, favoritism, and the recruitment of labor from outside the community, particularly from the Copperbelt Province. This exclusion from mining jobs, despite the presence of the mine in their locality, has deepened the poverty of local households, forcing many to depend on subsistence farming under deteriorating environmental conditions or to seek casual labor in nearby farms owned by private individuals. The instability of employment within the mine, marked by frequent layoffs, forced leave, and changes in ownership, further demonstrates the

fragile nature of mining-related livelihoods. The absence of consistent and meaningful corporate social responsibility initiatives from the mine, beyond initial infrastructure such as schools and clinics, reinforces the view that mining has failed to contribute to sustainable community development in Mazabuka.

The study has strongly shown that while nickel mining in Mazabuka was expected to drive development, it has instead intensified environmental degradation, weakened community land rights, and failed to deliver meaningful economic empowerment. The research highlights the urgent need for stronger regulatory frameworks that prioritize environmental sustainability, equitable benefit-sharing, and protection of community rights in the mining sector. Furthermore, genuine engagement with local communities, inclusive employment practices, and the fulfillment of resettlement promises are critical to restoring trust and mitigating the adverse impacts of mining. Without such reforms, nickel mining risks perpetuating cycles of poverty, dispossession, and environmental decline, rather than serving as a catalyst for sustainable local development.

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