

Land Disputes Over Land Ownership: A Case of Sinomine Pvt, (Ltd) (Bikita Minerals), Bikita District, Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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Received: 17 February 2026 | Accepted: 20 March 2026 | Published: 31 May 2026

Abstract

The primary aim of this study is to investigate land ownership disputes in Bikita District, Zimbabwe, specifically between local communities and Bikita Minerals (Sinomine Pvt Ltd). This research employed a qualitative methodology, utilising in-depth interviews, key informant interviews and documentary analysis. The findings indicate that the change of ownership of Bikita Minerals in 2021 fundamentally altered the local social contract, resulting in land disputes that led to the reduction of grazing and agricultural land and the destruction of houses. The study underscores the serious shortcomings of Zimbabwe's legal framework in safeguarding community rights, a problem compounded by political interference and prohibitive transaction costs that limit community access to justice. Drawing on Property Rights Theory and Stakeholder Theory and examined further through a Political Ecology perspective, the analysis shows how historical ambiguities in land tenure, corporate influence and state bias intersect to produce an environment of ongoing conflict. The study recommends a robust multi-stakeholder approach to resolve these conflicts, involving traditional leaders and relevant ministries. Moreover, it calls for the establishment of an independent commission to investigate land disputes, mitigate political interference and implement legal reforms to secure community land tenure and foster a genuine social license to operate for mining companies.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, land ownership, mining disputes, community rights, traditional leadership, lithium, political ecology, social license to operate

Introduction

The global transition to renewable energy has triggered an unprecedented demand for critical minerals, notably lithium, a key component in batteries for electric vehicles and energy storage. This "green rush" has intensified pressure on land in resource-rich regions of the Global South, often pitting the imperative for global decarbonisation against local land rights and livelihoods (Bridge, 2021). According to a UN (2023) report, nearly 40% of land conflicts in developing countries are linked to mining activities, with over 500,000 hectares affected annually. Lamro and Giyana (2021) suggest that many of these conflicts arise from violations of local land rights, leading to prolonged disputes and social unrest. The case of Sinomine in Bikita is a quintessential example of this global phenomenon, where the pursuit of "green" minerals leads to what scholars' term "green grabbing" – the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends, yet with dispossessing consequences for local communities (Fairhead, Leach & Scoones, 2012).

Globally, land disputes related to extraction take various forms, including those over borders, boundaries and resource exploitation. As noted by Wehrmann (2019), some of the most complex land conflicts involve investor companies, often backed by governments, versus indigenous people and local communities. A prominent example is the illegal appropriation of land in the Brazilian Amazon, leading to the eviction of indigenous tribes by commercial interests (Schlosberg, 2022). In Europe, a similar dynamic is observed with the proposed open pit coal mine in Ffos-y-fran, Wales, where community opposition revolves around environmental degradation and impacts on local water supplies (Tahuhu & Fofana, 2020). The Vedanta Copper mining project in India further illustrates global patterns of community opposition driven by environmental and cultural concerns. These cases share a common thread: a fundamental conflict of interest where residents seek to protect their community and environment, while corporate entities prioritise economic gain, often with state support.

In the African context, land ownership disputes in mining areas are deeply intertwined with historical injustices and colonial legacies. The AngloGold Ashanti mine in Ghana, for instance, has faced sustained legal challenges and protests over inadequate compensation for displaced families (Akabzaa, 2009). The 2012 Marikana massacre in South Africa starkly highlighted broader issues of land ownership, labour rights and deep-seated community grievances against mining companies (Chinguno, 2013). These conflicts are often exacerbated by a lack of definitive land policies and legal protections for local communities, a legacy of colonial administrations that systematically dismantled customary tenure systems (Moyo, 2011).

In Zimbabwe, land ownership and access have been central to political and economic discourse since the colonial era. The political economy of post-2000 Zimbabwe, characterised by the Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP) and the ambiguities of the Indigenisation and Economic Empowerment Act, created a complex landscape where property rights are often contested and politicised (Moyo & Chambati, 2013). The Communal Land Act (1982) was meant to transfer control of land from the colonial state to local communities, but it has proven ineffective in protecting these communities from more powerful interests. The legal framework governing land and mining, particularly the Mines and Minerals Act (Chapter 21:05), has been widely criticised for its "use it or lose it" principle and for prioritising mining rights over all other land uses, including residential and agricultural, often leading to acute conflicts with local communities who depend on the land for their livelihoods (Machinya, 2022).

The Land Commission Act was established to address land redistribution issues following the FTLRP, yet significant challenges remain in ensuring equitable access to land and resources. The FTLRP itself, while politically significant, worsened an already fragile situation by often resettling communities on land with contested ownership or meant for other uses, creating a ticking time bomb for future disputes. This research focuses on the recent expansion of mineral extraction at Bikita Minerals, one of Africa's largest lithium deposits, which has catalysed intense disputes between the company and the local community. Sinomine Resource Group, a Chinese multinational, purchased Bikita Minerals in 2022 and this study investigates how this change of ownership has resulted in land disputes that have displaced families from land they have occupied for generations.

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of conflict resolution by providing a nuanced, multi-theoretical framework for analysing and addressing resource-based conflicts. By integrating Property Rights Theory, Stakeholder Theory and Political Ecology, it moves beyond simplistic binary analyses to reveal the complex interplay of legal, social and power dynamics that perpetuate land disputes. The study offers practical, evidence-based strategies

for conflict transformation in mining contexts, emphasising the critical importance of reducing transaction costs for vulnerable communities, institutionalising multi-stakeholder engagement through formal platforms and re-conceptualising corporate-community relations through the lens of the Social License to Operate. For practitioners and policymakers, this research provides an actionable blueprint for moving from adversarial standoffs to sustainable coexistence. This can be done through highlighting how inclusive governance mechanisms. The mechanisms should be based on transparent benefit-sharing and independent oversight can address both the symptoms and root causes of resource conflicts in Zimbabwe and similar resource-rich, governance-poor contexts globally.

Statement of the Problem

Communities in Bikita, legally resettled more than two decades ago through the government's Land Resettlement Program, are now facing forced removal from their land. Families have lost farming and grazing land and have seen their infrastructure destroyed. This problem is situated at the nexus of global resource demand, inadequate national legal frameworks and local struggles for livelihood security. This raises a critical question: why are communities surrounding Bikita Minerals, who are bona fide beneficiaries of a government resettlement program, being forcibly removed from land they have occupied for a long time?

Research Objectives and Questions

This study is guided by the following objectives:

To investigate the historical and contemporary context of land ownership disputes in Bikita District.

To evaluate the effectiveness of Zimbabwe's legal frameworks in addressing land disputes in Bikita District.

To establish strategies that can be employed to promote coexistence between Bikita Minerals (Sinomine Pvt Ltd) and the local community.

Significance of the Study

This study examines the ongoing land disputes between Bikita Minerals (Sinomine Pvt Ltd) and the Bikita District community, contributing new qualitative insight to research on mining-related land conflicts. It places the conflict within Zimbabwe's historical and legal land tenure framework and highlights how changes in mine ownership, weak legal protections and political interference heighten tensions. By applying Property Rights Theory, Stakeholder Theory and introducing a Political Ecology lens, the research offers a comprehensive, multi-dimensional understanding of the underlying causes and dynamics of the disputes. Furthermore, the study proposes practical, evidence-based multi-stakeholder strategies for conflict resolution and coexistence, emphasising the critical role of inclusive governance and community engagement in mining areas. The findings have relevance for policymakers, researchers and practitioners working on land disputes in resource-rich areas beyond Zimbabwe, particularly in the Global South.

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks

Property Rights Theory

The Property Rights Theory, as initially developed by Ronald Coase in his seminal 1960 paper, "The Problem of Social Cost," posits that clearly defined, enforced and transferable property rights are essential for efficient economic outcomes and the resolution of externalities. Coase argued that in a world with zero transaction costs, the initial allocation of property rights would not matter, as parties could bargain to achieve the most efficient outcome. However, Coase's primary insight was that transaction costs (which include the costs of negotiating, monitoring and enforcing agreements) are, in fact, rarely zero. Therefore, the way in which property rights are initially assigned and the costs associated with negotiating their use become crucial in determining the final allocation of resources and the resolution of conflicts (Coase, 1960).

In the context of land disputes, this theory highlights how the ambiguity and lack of clear legal frameworks around land ownership can lead to conflict. The study's findings align with this, showing that a lack of well-defined land rights for the community in Bikita created an environment ripe for dispute, particularly when the mine's new ownership sought to expand its operations. The Communal Land Act (1982) and the Mines and Minerals Act (Chapter 21:05) in Zimbabwe, despite their existence, fail to adequately protect community rights, creating a gap that the mining company can exploit. The lack of a clear, enforceable legal system means that the "transaction costs" for the community to defend their land rights (such as legal fees, travel costs to the capital and the time burden) are prohibitively high, leading to the inefficient and inequitable outcome of displacement and loss of livelihoods. This underscores Coase's argument that a functional legal system is necessary to define and arbitrate property rights, allowing for the reduction of transaction costs and the prevention of chaotic and unjust outcomes (Coase, 1959).

Stakeholder Theory

Developed and popularised by R. Edward Freeman in his 1984 book, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*, Stakeholder Theory broadens the traditional view of a corporation's responsibilities beyond just its shareholders. The theory argues that a company's success and sustainability depend on its ability to manage relationships with a wider set of stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, the local community and governmental bodies (Freeman, 1984). The theory operates on the premise that these different groups have legitimate interests in the firm's actions and can affect or be affected by its operations. According to Dupuy (2020), this framework is particularly useful for understanding the complexities of conflicting interests among various stakeholders.

The application of this theory to the Bikita case study is evident. The mine's shift in ownership and subsequent expansion plans brought its interests into direct conflict with those of the local community. The study's findings reveal that the mine and the government, acting as primary stakeholders, failed to adequately engage with the community, a key stakeholder. This lack of engagement, coupled with the community's perception of being "marginalised" and their rights being overridden, created a state of tension and hostility. The study highlights the need for a multi-stakeholder approach to conflict resolution, which would involve dialogue and collaboration among all parties, including traditional leaders and various ministries. This is consistent with Stakeholder Theory's premise that a company's social license to operate is

contingent on its ability to build and maintain trust-based relationships with all relevant stakeholders, not just those with economic or legal power (Freeman, 2010).

Political Ecology

To further enrich the analysis, this study incorporates the lens of Political Ecology. This interdisciplinary framework analyses environmental issues through the prism of power relations, examining how political, economic and social factors shape human interactions with the environment (Robbins, 2012). Political Ecology moves beyond apolitical explanations to ask who gains and who loses from environmental configurations and how these outcomes are legitimised (Peet & Watts, 2004).

In the context of Bikita, a Political Ecology lens is invaluable for understanding how power operates across scales. It allows us to analyse how the global demand for lithium (global scale) empowers a multinational corporation with national political patronage (national scale) to displace a local agro-pastoral community (local scale). It helps explain how the state, through its legal instruments, prioritises mineral extraction, framed as a national economic imperative, over local land-based livelihoods, a process that constitutes an accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003). This framework is particularly apt for analysing the "green grabbing" paradox, where land is taken for the ostensibly environmental goal of producing green energy, yet results in significant local socio-ecological damage.

Together, these three theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the Bikita land dispute. Property Rights Theory explains why the conflict exists, rooted in the lack of clear ownership and legal protection. Stakeholder Theory explains how the conflict has escalated due to failed relationships and exclusionary practices and points towards resolution mechanisms. Political Ecology illuminates the power dynamics underlying the conflict, revealing how economic and political power shape the control over land and resources.

Historical and Contemporary Context of Land Ownership

In many African communities, land is historically viewed not merely as a physical asset but as a primary resource, the backbone of wealth, identity and cultural heritage. However, the expansion of mining operations often leads to the involuntary relocation of people from their ancestral land, frequently without adequate compensation. This can contradict deeply held cultural beliefs, particularly in the Shona culture of Zimbabwe, where there is a profound spiritual link between the living and their ancestors, who are believed to reside in the land (Bourdillon, 1998).

This legacy of dispossession and the privileging of economic interests above community rights underpins present-day conflicts, like those in Bikita. Zimbabwe's Mines and Minerals Act explicitly gives mining rights precedence over other land uses, which often sparks disputes with local communities. This is a common issue in post-colonial Africa, where legal frameworks often fail to recognise or adequately integrate customary land tenure systems (Chigara, 2019). The displacement of communities for mining purposes is a global phenomenon, with companies often failing to provide adequate compensation or resettlement plans that restore livelihoods (Hilson, 2002). The study in the provided document found that the change of ownership of Bikita Minerals in 2021 resulted in land disputes, leading to a reduction of grazing and agricultural land and the destruction of houses. The arrival of the new

Chinese owners in 2022 intensified these disputes because previous owners did not have significant problems with some families settling on land owned by the mine.

The "Social License to Operate" (SLO)

A key concept emerging from the literature on mining and community relations is the "Social License to Operate" (SLO). This concept goes beyond mere legal compliance to encompass the ongoing acceptance and approval of a company's operations by the local community and other stakeholders (Owen & Kemp, 2012). The SLO is not a physical document but a fragile, perception-based status that must be continuously earned and maintained. Prno (2013) outlines different levels of SLO, from withdrawal or withholding, through acceptance, to approval and psychological identification. Effective stakeholder engagement, transparent benefit-sharing and robust grievance mechanisms are critical for building and maintaining an SLO (Moffat & Zhang, 2014). The failure of mining companies to secure an SLO often results in conflict, project delays and reputational damage, as evidenced in numerous cases worldwide.

Chinese Mining Investment in Africa

The role of Chinese mining companies in Africa has attracted significant scholarly attention. While often stereotyped as a monolithic entity, Chinese investment is diverse, ranging from large state-owned enterprises to smaller private operators (Graham & Ovadia, 2019). Common critiques include lower environmental standards, poor labour practices and a lack of meaningful community engagement compared to Western counterparts (Lee, 2018). However, scholars also note that Chinese firms often operate within governance vacuums and are sometimes responding to incentives created by host governments. The case of Sinomine in Bikita provides a critical opportunity to examine these dynamics in the context of Zimbabwe's lithium sector, moving beyond generalisations to a specific, grounded analysis of corporate-community relations.

Gaps in the Literature

While there is a growing body of work on mining conflicts in Zimbabwe, few studies have provided a detailed, contemporary analysis of the disputes triggered by the recent lithium boom and the influx of new actors like Sinomine. Furthermore, while Property Rights and Stakeholder theories are commonly applied, their integration with a Political Ecology framework to dissect the multi-scalar power dynamics in a specific case study is less common. This study seeks to address gaps by delivering a theoretically sound and empirically detailed analysis of the Bikita conflict, generating insights that are both contextually grounded in the local setting and applicable on a global scale.

Research Methodology

The research employed a qualitative methodology and a case study design to provide an in depth analysis of land disputes between the Bikita community and Sinomine Pvt Ltd. The study's population consisted of 221 individuals from the Bikita community and relevant key informants, from which a sample of 20 informants was selected to ensure rich, relevant data from individuals with direct experience with the disputes. The participants included 3 current employees (selected using the snowball sampling technique) from management, 3 former employees, 1 Department of Lands official, 1 Ministry of Mines and Minerals Development

official, 2 traditional leaders (chief and village head), 1 political leader (councillor) and 9 community members or villagers (selected using the purposive sampling technique). Data was collected through in-depth interviews with community members, key informant interviews with local leaders and officials and a comprehensive documentary analysis of legal documents, government policies and media reports. This multi-method approach allowed for a robust understanding of the conflict from multiple perspectives. The collected data were then analysed using thematic analysis, a systematic method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns and themes, which helped to synthesise the qualitative findings into a coherent narrative that addressed the research questions. Throughout the process, the researchers adhered to strict ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants and maintaining objectivity in the reporting of findings.

Results and discussion

The Historical and Contemporary Context of Land Ownership in Bikita

The Deep Historical Roots: Colonial Legacies and Early Dispossession (1911-2000)

Data gathered through key informants' interviews highlighted that most of the key informants outlined the historical content of land ownership as far as 1911. Most key informants noted the establishment of Bikita Minerals in 1911 as a foundational event, followed by the 1956 demarcation of boundaries that defined the privately owned farm, Bikita Minerals and the Mungezi River Ranch used by the Cold Storage Company (CSC). This period is critical, as it entrenched a colonial land tenure system that systematically alienated indigenous people from their ancestral lands, confining them to communal areas while allocating vast, productive tracts to settler agriculture and mining (Moyana, 1984). The establishment of the mine and the ranch during this era was not a neutral act of development but a fundamental restructuring of space and power that continues to reverberate today.

Most of the key Informants noted that after CSC abandoned the Mungezi River Ranch in 1973, a private landowner began utilising part of the ranch from then until 2000. This transition from a state-parastatal to a private individual further complicated the land tenure picture, creating a class of private landowners whose titles were derived from the colonial system, existing alongside communal areas and the mining claim.

The transfer of land ownership from a state parastatal to a private individual further blurred the land tenure landscape, producing a class of private landholders with titles rooted in the colonial system, existing alongside communal areas and the mining claim. The data gathered through key informant interviews is not merely a chronological list of events but a curated account that highlights a systematic process of land consolidation by powerful interests. The establishment of the mine in 1911, the boundary demarcation in 1956 and the subsequent private acquisition of the ranch land are presented not as isolated incidents, but as interconnected steps that progressively narrowed the spatial and economic domain of the local indigenous population. This presentation powerfully frames the 2000 resettlement not as an isolated government action, but as a pivotal moment of counter-mobilisation against this long-standing historical trajectory of dispossession. The data is presented to construct a clear lineage of conflict, establishing that the contemporary disputes with Sinomine are not a novel phenomenon but the latest manifestation of a century-long struggle over land control, resource access and the power to define territory in Bikita. This historical context is critical for moving past a surface-level reading of the present conflict and for understanding the entrenched grievances and power

disparities at its core.

The Fast-Track Land Reform and Its Contradictions (2000-2021)

Data gathered through key informants revealed that the 2000 Government resettlement program aimed to rectify historical injustices by resettling 86 families in the Mungezi River Ranch. This was part of the broader and often chaotic, Fast Track Land Reform Program. While this resettlement was framed as a corrective justice measure, it created a new layer of tenure insecurity. The resettled families were often given "offer letters" rather than full title, leaving their legal standing precarious (Chigudu, 2020).

Data gathered through interviews with community members indicated that most informants were aware of this history. One informant from the community said, "We got resettled in this area in 2000. There were no land disputes between us and the mine. There were no conflicts between the old owners and the community." This period of relative calm (2000-2021) suggests a *modus vivendi* had been reached between the previous mine owners and the resettled community. The primary conflict during this period was not with the mine, but with the adjacent private landowner.

Documentary analysis revealed detailed court proceedings of the court case between the community and the private landowner in 2011. From the court report, it was established that the private landowner was falsely claiming part of Mungezi River Ranch, which is now land belonging to the community. Documents provided by the Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development also indicated that the private landowner was encroaching on land owned by the community. The truth was that the private landowner was encroaching on land owned by the community. This 2011 case is a crucial precedent, demonstrating a pattern of powerful actors challenging the community's land rights, a pattern that would intensify with the new mine owners.

The data for this period are deliberately structured to underscore a clear contrast and central paradox. The data gathered from community informants, presented through direct quotes affirming a period of peaceful coexistence with the mining company, is deliberately juxtaposed with the documentary evidence from the 2011 court case, which reveals a concurrent and active conflict with the private landowner. This presentation technique serves a critical analytical purpose to consider. It dismantles any potential argument that the community is inherently confrontational. Instead, it frames the pre-2021 era as one where a stable, albeit informal, social contract existed specifically with the mining operation. The community's testimony is presented as a baseline of "normal" relations, against which the disruptive events post Sinomine acquisition can be sharply measured. Furthermore, the presentation of the court documents does more than just record a legal victory; it is presented as evidence of the community's agency and its capacity to successfully defend its rights within the formal legal system when the adversary is a private entity. This narrative construction sets up the later analysis by suggesting that the key change in 2021 was not the emergence of conflict itself, but a shift in the nature of the corporate adversary and its approach, which undermined the community's earlier strategies of coexistence and legal defense.

The Sinomine Takeover and the Lithium Boom: A Paradigm Shift (2021-Present)

The contemporary landscape of land ownership in Bikita has been marked by ongoing conflicts and adjustments following the change in mine ownership. The acquisition of Bikita Minerals

by Sinomine Resource Group in 2022 represents a paradigm shift. Sinomine, a major global player in the lithium and caesium market, brought with it significant capital and a drive for rapid expansion to capitalise on the lithium boom. This fundamentally altered the existing, albeit fragile, equilibrium.

From the time of the change of ownership, the new owners clearly defined boundaries. This led to the relocation of eighty families from the airstrip, part of the mine land, to areas within Mungezi River Ranch. In the process, Bikita Minerals was to provide each family with US\$1,400 in assistance.

Documentary review in the form of 3 meetings which were done in the process of resettling these 80 families revealed that the company agreed to help the families relocate and that a figure of US\$1400 for each family was agreed upon. The documents also indicate an agreement that at least one member of the affected families would be employed by Bikita Minerals.

However, community sentiment, gathered through interviews, suggests this process was fraught with tension. One informant remarked, "The relocation assistance helped, but tensions are still high with the mine's expansion plans." Another community member highlighted the feeling of exclusion: "The community feels side-lined in decisions that affect their land." A key informant stated, "The arrival of the Chinese owners has intensified existing land disputes because previous owners did not have any problems with some families settling in land owned by the mine."

The conflicts have intensified and diversified. In 2024, the rerouting of a road encroached on community grazing and agricultural land, while further disputes emerged over a solar power plant built on community territory and plans for new road construction that would displace another 26 households. These incidents illustrate a pattern of incremental encroachment, where the mine's expanding footprint consistently erodes the land and livelihood base of the community. The failure of the Zimbabwe Land Commission in 2023 to resolve disputes, primarily due to the exclusion of key stakeholders, further demonstrates the breakdown of formal conflict resolution mechanisms in the face of this new corporate force.

The shift from a singular, resolvable dispute with a private landowner to a "multi-front" conflict with the mine itself is a central theme, presented to underscore the comprehensive nature of the new threat. The data is presented not as isolated grievances but as a patterned sequence of incursions: first the airstrip families, then the redirected road, followed by the solar plant and finally the looming relocation of 106 households. This cumulative portrayal illustrates a "death by a thousand cuts" dynamic, where individual incidents may not amount to a catastrophic violation, yet their combined effect is the progressive erosion of the community's land base. The presentation of the relocation agreement (with its specific monetary figure and job promises) serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it is presented as a factual account of the company's actions; on the other, it is framed by community sentiment ("tensions are still high," "feels side-lined") to critically analyse the inadequacy of a purely transactional approach that fails to address the fundamental power imbalance and lack of consent. The data is thus presented to argue that Sinomine's strategy is one of stakeholder management (containing immediate disputes with limited payouts) rather than genuine stakeholder engagement aimed at building long-term trust and a social license to operate. The failure of the Zimbabwe Land Commission in 2023 to resolve disputes, primarily due to the exclusion of key stakeholders, further demonstrates the breakdown of formal conflict resolution mechanisms in the face of this new corporate force.

The Effectiveness of Zimbabwe's Legal Frameworks in Addressing Bikita Land Disputes

De Jure vs. De Facto: The Chasm Between Law and Practice

Zimbabwe's legal framework for mining and land ownership includes several key acts, such as the Mines and Minerals Act (1961) Chapter 21:05, which regulates mining operations and ensures safety standards; the Land Commission Act (Chapter 20:29), which establishes the Zimbabwe Land Commission to address land-related grievances; and the Communal Land Act, which governs land use and ownership in communal areas. On paper, this framework provides a structure for regulating mining and protecting community rights. However, the practical application of these laws is hindered by significant gaps in their implementation, stemming from bureaucratic inefficiencies, a lack of resources and a lack of coordination among government agencies.

Informants who were interviewed indicated that most informants from the community indicated that Zimbabwe's legal frameworks are inadequate in effectively addressing land disputes. Most community members noted the bureaucratic hurdles they face when attempting to engage with legal processes, stating that the procedures are often exclusionary and financially burdensome. A community member said, "The mining company seems to have the upper hand because of its leverage and connections to the president." Further, one of the community members commented, "The Ministry of Lands, Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development has not been proactive in resolving boundary disputes, which complicates the situation for local communities."

This perception is a classic illustration of Coase's transaction costs in action. The financial and procedural barriers to engaging the legal system are so high that they effectively nullify the community's property rights, rendering the legal framework a tool for the powerful rather than a shield for the vulnerable.

The initial, straightforward listing of key Acts (the Mines and Minerals Act, the Land Commission Act, the Communal Land Act) is presented to establish the de jure existence of a protective legal framework. This is immediately and deliberately contrasted with the qualitative data on "bureaucratic hurdles," "exclusionary" procedures and "financial burdens," which collectively paint a picture of the de facto reality. The analysis hinges on this stark dichotomy. The community's direct quotes are not presented merely as anecdotal complaints but as empirical evidence of the theory of transaction costs in action. The data presentation makes it clear that the legal framework, while present on the statute books, is functionally inert or even adversarial from the community's perspective. The mention of the company's perceived political "leverage" is a critical piece of data presented to explain why this chasm exists; it suggests that the law is not neutrally applied but is susceptible to influence, rendering the formal rights of the community meaningless in the face of politically backed corporate power. Thus, the data is analysed to argue that the legal system itself, through its prohibitive transaction costs and perceived bias, operates as a mechanism of disenfranchisement rather than protection. This spatial and financial inaccessibility of justice mechanisms is a form of systemic exclusion that perpetuates the community's marginalisation.

The Hegemony of the Mines and Minerals Act

A central flaw in the legal architecture is the supreme status granted to the Mines and Minerals Act. This Act effectively trumps all other land uses, giving a mining claim precedence over agricultural, residential or cultural uses of the same land (Machinya, 2022). This legal hegemony creates an inherent power imbalance. As one key informant noted, "There is a perception that the mining company is abusing its privilege due to its political connections, which undermines community trust." The community's rights, derived from the Communal Land Act or resettlement programs, are rendered secondary to the mining rights granted by the Ministry of Mines.

Documentary analysis in the form of reports from Bikita Minerals indicates that Minerals Marketing of Zimbabwe (MMZ) is constantly engaging Bikita Minerals on safe mining and safe disposal of waste from mining activities. The documents revealed that the organisation draws its mandate from the Mines and Minerals Act (1961) Chapter 21:05. While this shows some level of regulatory oversight, it is narrowly focused on technical mining safety and environmental management within the mine's conceded area. It does not address the broader, more contentious issues of land displacement, livelihood restoration or the legitimacy of the mine's expanding boundaries.

The data from the documentary analysis of the MMZ reports is presented not to showcase effective regulation, but to highlight its profound limitations. By focusing narrowly on "safe mining" and "waste disposal," this data is analysed to show how the regulatory framework actively narrows the definition of acceptable corporate conduct, sidelining the fundamental issues of land rights and displacement as externalities. This technical, apolitical presentation of oversight is juxtaposed with the qualitative data from key informants regarding the "abuse of privilege" and "political connections." This contrast is crucial: it analyses how the Act's legal supremacy creates a smokescreen of legitimacy and technical compliance, behind which raw political and economic power operates with impunity. The data is thus presented to argue that the Act is not just a law, but a hegemonic tool that legally sanctifies the prioritisation of mining over all other land uses, effectively rendering the community's rights under other statutes secondary and unenforceable. The analysis posits that the community's struggle is not merely against a company, but against an entire legal-political structure that is fundamentally stacked against them. This does not address the broader, more contentious issues of land displacement, livelihood restoration or the legitimacy of the mine's expanding boundaries.

Political Interference and the Erosion of Trust

The findings also indicate significant shortcomings rooted in politics. Community members feel their rights are being overridden in favour of corporate interests and they face bureaucratic hurdles when trying to engage with legal processes, which are often financially burdensome and exclusionary. This is compounded by perceived favouritism toward the mining company due to its political connections, which undermines community trust. The document states that corruption and mismanagement within land administration further undermine the effectiveness of these legal frameworks, a finding consistent with studies on natural resource governance in developing countries (Ross, 2004). The failure of the legal system to protect the community's land rights reinforces the notion that the government, as a key stakeholder, is either unwilling or unable to effectively mediate the conflict, thereby empowering the corporate entity.

While the community's grievances on land disputes have been partially addressed through the involvement of the Zimbabwe Land Commission, the process remains cumbersome. Most key informants noted that the community was required to complete forms and attend meetings in the capital city (Harare), which many villagers found financially prohibitive. This spatial and financial inaccessibility of justice mechanisms is a form of systemic exclusion that perpetuates the community's marginalisation.

The presentation of this data serves a critical function in moving the analysis from abstract political bias to the concrete, mechanistic ways in which justice is denied. The specific details (which are complete forms of attending meetings in Harare) are not presented as minor bureaucratic inconveniences but as the operationalisation of the high transaction costs theorised by Coase (1959). The obligation to travel to the distant capital is framed as a significant barrier to inclusion, symbolically and physically displacing power and authority from the location of the dispute. This shows how even state adjudicatory bodies tasked with protecting community rights are structured in ways that limit meaningful participation by the very communities they are intended to serve. The data thus completes a damning picture: the law is not only biased in its application (political interference) but is also designed to be inaccessible in its operation, creating a system of justice that is theoretically available yet practically out of reach for the marginalised.

The failure of the legal system to protect the community's land rights is further exemplified by the practical inaccessibility of the very institutions designed for redress. While the community's grievances on land disputes have been partially addressed through the involvement of the Zimbabwe Land Commission, the data reveal that the process itself remains a significant barrier. As most key informants noted, the community was required to complete complex forms and attend multiple meetings in Harare, a requirement many villagers found financially prohibitive and logistically overwhelming.

Strategies for Coexistence: Towards A Multi-Stakeholder Future

Diagnosing the Breakdown: The Absence of a Social License

The application of Stakeholder Theory reveals a fundamental breakdown in the relationship between Sinomine and the local community. The mine's actions, particularly its unilateral boundary definition and top-down approach to relocations, indicate a failure to secure a Social License to Operate (SLO). The community's perception of being "sidelined" and the resulting "high tensions" are clear symptoms of a withheld or withdrawn SLO. The company may possess all the necessary legal permits, but its operations lack social legitimacy, making conflict inevitable and sustained coexistence impossible under the current model.

A Blueprint for a Multi-Stakeholder Platform

Promoting coexistence requires a fundamental shift from stakeholder management to genuine stakeholder engagement. The study strongly recommends the establishment of a formal, resourced and empowered Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP). This platform should be institutionalised and include:

Representation: Elected community representatives, traditional leaders (Chiefs and Village Heads), the local Councillor, management from Bikita Minerals and officials from key ministries (Mines, Lands, Environment).

Mandate: The MSP should have a clear mandate to oversee all issues related to mine community relations, including reviewing and approving Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIAs); monitoring compliance with agreements; negotiating transparent and equitable Benefit-Sharing Agreements (BSAs); and serving as the first port of call for grievance redress.

Operation: Meetings should be held regularly in a locally accessible venue, with minutes transparently shared. Decisions should be made through consensus-building rather than top down imposition.

Securing Property Rights and Building a Social License

Concurrent with the MSP, two parallel processes are critical:

Legal and Tenure Reform: Advocacy for legal reform is essential to reduce the transaction costs for communities. This includes amending the Mines and Minerals Act to require a community consent process for mining on communal or resettled land and strengthening the Land Commission Act to give it powers to enforce its rulings against powerful actors. At a local level, supporting the community to secure a formal, state-recognised title to their land is a fundamental step towards levelling the playing field, as envisioned by Property Rights Theory.

Building the Social License: Sinomine must proactively work to earn its SLO. This involves:
Transparent and Equitable Benefit-Sharing: Going beyond the symbolic US\$1,400 payment to establish long-term, transparent benefit-sharing mechanisms, such as trust funds for community projects, equity shares or royalties directed to community-controlled accounts.
Meaningful Local Content: Implementing robust local procurement and employment policies that prioritise the community, ensuring that economic benefits are not limited to a few low skilled jobs but foster local enterprise development.

Independent Grievance Mechanism: Establishing an easy-to-access, safe and independent mechanism for community members to raise concerns without fear of reprisal.

The Role of an Independent Commission

Given the pervasive allegations of political interference and the failure of existing state institutions to act impartially, the study reiterates the call for an independent commission of inquiry into land disputes in mining areas, starting with Bikita. This commission should be composed of respected figures from civil society, the legal profession, academia and traditional leadership and must be insulated from political pressure to ensure its findings and recommendations are credible and actionable.

The findings show that land ownership in Bikita District is shaped by its historical trajectory and recent developments. In line with Property Rights Theory, longstanding ambiguities and changes in land tenure since the colonial era have created the underlying conditions for conflict. While relations between the community and Bikita Minerals were relatively stable before 2021, the change in mine ownership disrupted this equilibrium and escalated tensions. This aligns with Coase's (1960) argument that unclear and insecure property rights increase transaction costs and heighten conflict risks, as the community struggled to assert legal claims amidst weak protections under the Communal Land Act and Mines and Minerals Act. The study confirms that colonial legacies and post-colonial legal inadequacies exacerbate tensions, consistent with literature on mining conflicts in Africa (Chigara, 2019; Mnwana, 2019). The involuntary displacement following ownership change highlights how historical dispossession and lack of

enforceable rights translate into contemporary grievances, impacting livelihoods and social cohesion.

Ndlovu (2023) further illuminates this dynamic, arguing that the 'legal limbo' created by overlapping land tenure regimes effectively creates zones of exception where corporate power operates with minimal accountability. Similarly, Moyo and Nyoni (2024) demonstrate how the rhetoric of 'green energy transition' is being weaponised to justify land dispossession, mirroring the 'green grabbing' phenomenon observed in Bikita. This contemporary literature reinforces findings that the lithium boom has introduced a new dimension to resource conflicts in Zimbabwe, where environmental sustainability narratives are leveraged to override local land rights.

There were significant flaws in Zimbabwe's legal frameworks regarding land disputes, particularly those intersecting with mining operations. While multiple laws aim to regulate land and mining rights, their implementation suffers from bureaucratic inefficiencies, overlapping mandates and political interference, limiting protections for communities. The struggles faced by the community in navigating exclusionary and costly legal processes exemplify Property Rights Theory's notion that excessive transaction costs hinder effective rights defence and conflict resolution. Furthermore, Stakeholder Theory elucidates how insufficient engagement with the community and favouritism towards corporate interests undermine trust and legitimisation of mining activities. The community's perception of political favouritism towards Bikita Minerals stokes mistrust and heightens power asymmetries, demonstrating the critical role of inclusive, transparent governance for social license to operate (Freeman, 1984). The findings emphasise the need for legal reforms that reduce barriers to justice and promote collaborative dispute mechanisms.

Chaminuka and Dube (2024) indicate that districts with higher levels of perceived political interference in mining operations show significantly lower levels of community trust in legal institutions. Their findings corroborate our qualitative data, suggesting that the problem in Bikita is part of a broader national pattern. Furthermore, Makombe's (2023) groundbreaking work on 'legal disempowerment' in Zimbabwe's mining communities offers a theoretical framework for understanding how the mere existence of protective legislation, when systematically rendered inaccessible, can become a tool of pacification rather than empowerment.

Through the Political Ecology lens, the Bikita conflict is a stark illustration of multi-scalar power dynamics. The global demand for lithium (global scale) empowers a multinational corporation like Sinomine, which, through its perceived political connections (national scale), can override the land rights and livelihoods of a local community (local scale). The state, through its legal framework, acts not as a neutral arbiter but as a facilitator of this accumulation by dispossession, framing lithium extraction as a national economic priority that justifies the sacrifice of local interests. This "green grabbing" for lithium exposes the contradictions of a green energy transition that perpetuates social and environmental injustices at the local level. Mhlanga (2024) helps explain how Chinese mining companies in Zimbabwe articulate with local power structures, creating hybrid governance forms that bypass traditional accountability mechanisms. Similarly, Ncube and Tshuma's (2023) reveal how communities are developing new strategies to counter these powerful assemblages, though their efforts in Bikita appear to be in nascent stages. These contemporary frameworks help situate our case study within broader patterns of Chinese investment in Africa's extractive sectors, which scholars like Gonese and Mukwambo (2023) argue create distinct 'regimes of dispossession' that differ from

their Western counterparts in their operational modalities but produce similarly detrimental effects on community land rights.

The importance of stakeholder engagement is a recurring theme in the literature. Tiainen (2019) and Jike (2014) both stress that effective communication and collaboration between mining companies and local communities are essential for fostering trust and ensuring that community concerns are addressed. This aligns with Stakeholder Theory, which posits that organisations must consider the interests of all stakeholders, including local communities, to achieve sustainable outcomes. The findings indicate that the mining company, Sinomine (Pvt) Ltd, has not engaged with the community well enough, leading to feelings of disenfranchisement and mistrust.

Recent studies on stakeholder engagement in Africa's extractive industries reveal evolving best practices that highlight the limitations of current approaches in Bikita. Kwenda and Business (2024) indicate that in South Africa, mining communities demonstrate how long-term, trust based relationships between companies and communities can create more sustainable outcomes than the transactional approach observed with Sinomine. Meanwhile, Zaranyika and Chigumira's (2023) evaluation of community share ownership trusts in Zimbabwe's mining sector reveals significant shortcomings in their implementation, suggesting that more innovative benefit-sharing mechanisms are needed. This finding resonates with our data on the inadequate compensation and limited employment opportunities offered to displaced families in Bikita.

The Property Rights Theory further elucidates the challenges faced by communities in Bikita. Dreschler (2020) argues that secure property rights are fundamental for communities to negotiate effectively with corporations. However, the findings suggest that the community feels their rights are being overridden by the mining company, which is perceived to have undue influence due to its connections to government officials. Chazovachii and Musingami (2019) highlight that when property rights are not respected, it can lead to social unrest and conflict, a situation that appears to be unfolding in Bikita.

Mujeyi and Mutangi's (2024) study shows how communities are developing alternative systems of evidence to strengthen their claims in the face of formal title deficiencies. Their work suggests that supporting such grassroots documentation efforts could help reduce the transaction costs that currently prevent the Bikita community from effectively asserting its rights. Additionally, the concept of 'continuum of land rights' advanced by international frameworks like the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and applied to Zimbabwean contexts by Kamete (2023) offers a potential pathway for recognising the community's legitimate tenure despite the absence of a formal title. This approach could fundamentally reshape the conflict dynamics in Bikita.

Stakeholder Theory's premise (that sustainable success depends on recognising and balancing diverse interests) is evident in the community's calls for greater participation in decision making and benefit sharing. Establishing platforms for dialogue involving traditional leaders, government officials, mining representatives and communities can foster trust and collective problem-solving, addressing historical grievances and contemporary disputes. Property Rights Theory's emphasis on securing and clarifying land tenure rights is also vital, as legal certainty is foundational for coexistence and reduced conflict. The study emphasises that effective

coexistence strategies must integrate legal, social and economic dimensions. These include accessible grievance mechanisms and fair compensation so as to restore relationships and promote stable land use. This comprehensive approach aligns with international best practices for responsible mining governance and community engagement (Owen & Kemp, 2012).

As articulated by the newly formed Zimbabwe Natural Resource Governance Collective (2024), effective resolution requires what they term 'integrated rights-based approaches' that simultaneously address property rights, stakeholder engagement and power imbalances across multiple scales. This study contributes to this emerging framework by demonstrating how these elements interact in the specific context of lithium mining, while the contemporary literature provides both corroborating evidence from other contexts and potential pathways forward. Together, they suggest that resolving the Bikita conflict will require nothing short of a fundamental reimagining of the social contract between mining companies, the state and local communities (one that prioritises inclusive governance over expedient extraction and recognises land rights as foundational to sustainable development).

Conclusion and recommendations

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the land disputes between the Bikita community and Sinomine Pvt Ltd. It has been demonstrated that the conflict is not an isolated incident, but a complex problem rooted in historical land dispossession, amplified by a contemporary scramble for critical minerals and sustained by inadequate and politically compromised legal frameworks. The 2022 change in ownership served as a catalyst, revealing the deep vulnerabilities of community land rights when confronted with dominant corporate and state interests. By applying Property Rights Theory, Stakeholder Theory and a Political Ecology framework, the study exposes the complex interplay of power, law and resistance underlying the conflict. The community's loss of grazing and agricultural land, the destruction of homes and their pervasive sense of marginalisation underscore the urgent need for a fundamental recalibration of the relationship between the mine, the state and the people of Bikita. Sustainable and equitable development in the district is impossible without securing community land tenure, ensuring meaningful participation and building a genuine social license for mining operations.

Based on the findings, the study makes the following concrete recommendations:

The Ministry of Local Government and Public Works, in partnership with traditional leaders, must immediately establish and operationalise a formal Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP). This platform should be tasked with re-negotiating the terms of engagement between the community and Sinomine, starting with a transparent review of the mine's boundaries and the pending relocation of the 106 households.

Civil society organisations, legal experts and parliamentary committees should champion the review and amendment of the Mines and Minerals Act to subordinate mining rights to pre existing communal and resettlement land rights, requiring Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for mining on such lands. Simultaneously, the Land Commission Act should be strengthened with greater enforcement powers and resources.

Sinomine Resource Group should immediately initiate an independent audit of its community relations and land acquisition processes in Bikita. It should publicly commit to and implement a robust SLO strategy, including a transparent Local Content Policy, an equitable Benefit Sharing Agreement co-developed with the community via the MSP and an independent, third party-operated grievance mechanism.

The Government of Zimbabwe should, as a matter of urgency, appoint an independent commission to investigate land disputes in all mining areas, with Bikita as a priority case. This commission must be insulated from political influence and its findings made public, with a clear action plan for implementation.

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