



Building Trust in Mining Communities: Analysing the Role of Social Licence to Operate in Shamva District, Zimbabwe

Gwatidzo Kevin Tirivanhu



Open Access

ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of Social Licence to Operate (SLO) in shaping trust and community acceptance within Zimbabwe's mining sector, focusing on mining communities in Shamva District. Despite mining's central contribution to Zimbabwe's economy, tensions between mining companies and host communities continue to undermine sustainable development and operational stability. Using a qualitative approach and case study design, the study used on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation conducted with community members, traditional leaders, civil society actors, and mining company representatives in selected mining communities in Shamva District. The findings reveal that trust, transparency, and meaningful community participation are central to securing and sustaining SLO. However, these processes are frequently weakened by inadequate consultation, limited operational transparency, weak Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) implementation, and perceptions of political interference in mining governance. Cultural sensitivity, respect for local institutions, and environmental stewardship emerged as critical factors shaping community perceptions of mining operations. The study concludes that SLO in Zimbabwe cannot be achieved through CSR initiatives alone, but requires inclusive governance, institutional accountability, and sustained community engagement. These findings contribute to broader debates on extractive governance and offer practical insights for policymakers, mining companies, and local communities seeking to strengthen social trust and sustainable resource governance.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received:
May 2025

Accepted:
October 2025

Published:
July 2026

KEYWORDS: Social Licence to Operate (SLO), Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Cultural Sensitivity, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), Community Engagement.



INTRODUCTION

The concept of Social Licence to Operate (SLO) has become increasingly important in global extractive industries, particularly in developing countries where mining activities generate profound environmental, social, and political consequences (Owen & Kemp, 2013; Jijelava & Vanclay, 2017). Unlike formal legal licences issued by the state, SLO refers to the ongoing acceptance, legitimacy, and approval granted to mining operations by local communities and broader stakeholders (Oshionebo, 2024). In recent decades, the mining sector has increasingly recognised that regulatory compliance alone is insufficient to guarantee operational continuity. Across many resource-rich regions, mining projects have experienced resistance, protests, operational disruptions, and reputational damage due to deteriorating relationships with host communities (Bice & Moffat, 2014; Vanclay & Esteves, 2024). Consequently, SLO has emerged as a critical governance framework for understanding how mining companies secure trust, legitimacy, and long-term community support.

These issues are particularly significant in Zimbabwe, where mining plays a central role in the national economy. The country possesses extensive deposits of

gold, platinum, diamonds, chrome, coal, and lithium, making the extractive sector one of the largest contributors to export earnings and foreign currency generation (Zimbabwe Investment and Development Agency, 2023). Successive governments have positioned mining as a strategic pillar for economic recovery, industrial development, and attracting foreign investment attraction. However, despite its economic importance, Zimbabwe's mining sector has long been associated with environmental degradation, displacement, labour disputes, unequal benefit distribution, and tensions between mining companies and local communities (Mkodzongi & Spiegel, 2019; Mutondoro & Ncube, 2021). In many mining areas, communities continue to experience deteriorating livelihoods, land dispossession, water pollution, and limited participation in decisions affecting their social and environmental environments.

The expansion of foreign mining investment, particularly involving Chinese companies, has intensified debates surrounding accountability, transparency, and community trust (Gukurume & Matsika, 2022). While Chinese investment has contributed to infrastructure development, employment creation, and increased mineral production, several communities have raised concerns

regarding environmental damage, inadequate consultation, poor labour conditions, and limited local benefits (Yap & Phiri, 2023). In districts such as Shamva, conflicts between mining companies and communities have increasingly reflected broader concerns about exclusion from decision-making processes and the perceived alignment between political elites and corporate interests. These dynamics have heightened the importance of SLO as communities increasingly demand recognition, participation, and accountability beyond formal legal compliance.

Zimbabwe's mining industry operates within a legal and institutional framework that includes the Mines and Minerals Act, the Environmental Management Act, and related environmental and investment regulations. However, the existence of formal regulation has not always translated into effective governance or meaningful community protection. Weak institutional enforcement, allegations of corruption, political interference, and fragmented regulatory oversight have often undermined public confidence in mining governance systems (Saunders & Carment, 2023). In this context, SLO extends beyond Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes or periodic consultation

meetings. It involves sustained processes of engagement, transparency, responsiveness, and ethical conduct that shape how communities perceive the legitimacy of mining operations.

Trust, therefore, becomes central to the relationship between mining companies and host communities. Trust is not established through legal authority alone, but through consistent engagement, transparent communication, respect for local cultures and institutions, and responsiveness to community grievances. Where mining companies fail to meaningfully involve communities meaningfully in decision-making, tensions and resistance often emerge. Conversely, companies perceived as socially responsible and accountable are more likely to secure community cooperation and operational stability (Moffat & Zhang, 2014).

Despite growing international scholarship on SLO, relatively limited research has examined how these dynamics operate within Zimbabwe's mining sector, particularly in relation to foreign investment, political influence, and local governance realities. Existing studies have often focused on environmental impacts, indigenisation policies, or CSR initiatives, with less attention given to the processes

through which trust and legitimacy are negotiated between mining companies and local communities. This study, therefore, examines the role of SLO in building trust between mining companies and local communities in Shamva District, Zimbabwe, with particular attention to the factors that shape community acceptance, participation, and perceptions of legitimacy.

By analysing community experiences, stakeholder interactions, and mining governance practices, the study contributes to broader debates on extractive governance, sustainable development, and community participation in resource-rich economies. It further provides practical insights for policymakers, mining companies, and civil society actors seeking to strengthen trust, reduce conflict, and promote more inclusive and socially responsible mining practices in Zimbabwe.

Statement of the Problem

Despite mining's central contribution to Zimbabwe's economy, tensions between mining companies and host communities remain widespread, particularly in mining districts such as Shamva. Issues including environmental degradation, inadequate consultation, unequal benefit distribution, and poor transparency have contributed to growing

mistrust toward mining operations. In recent years, concerns surrounding some foreign-owned mining companies, particularly Chinese investors, have further intensified debates around accountability, community participation, and social legitimacy. Although mining companies often rely on legal licences and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives to justify operations, these measures have frequently failed to secure genuine community acceptance and long-term trust. This highlights the growing importance of Social Licence to Operate (SLO) as a framework for understanding community legitimacy and sustainable mining governance. While international scholarship on SLO has expanded significantly, limited research has examined how trust and social legitimacy are negotiated within Zimbabwe's mining sector, particularly in relation to foreign investment and local governance dynamics. This study, therefore, examines the factors shaping SLO in Shamva District, Zimbabwe, and explores pathways for strengthening trust and community engagement in the mining sector.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the factors influencing Social Licence to Operate in the

mining sector in Shamva District, Zimbabwe.

2. To analyse the role of trust in shaping relationships between mining companies and local communities.
3. To assess how community engagement practices influence the sustainability of Social Licence to Operate.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to understanding how Social Licence to Operate (SLO) shapes relationships between mining companies and host communities in Zimbabwe's mining sector. By examining the factors influencing trust, community acceptance, and stakeholder engagement in Shamva District, the study provides insight into the social and governance dimensions of mining operations in resource-rich communities. The research is significant because it highlights the importance of transparency, meaningful community engagement, and culturally sensitive practices in strengthening relationships between mining companies and local communities.

It also demonstrates how weak consultation, limited participation, and governance challenges can undermine trust and social legitimacy. The findings offer

practical value for policymakers, mining companies, civil society organisations, and community leaders seeking to improve mining governance and reduce conflict in mining areas. In addition, the study contributes to broader debates on sustainable mining, community participation, and responsible resource governance in developing economies.

Delimitations of the Study

This study is confined to examining Social Licence to Operate (SLO) within Zimbabwe's mining sector, with specific focus on mining communities in Shamva District. The research concentrates on factors influencing SLO, particularly trust, community engagement practices, and community perceptions of mining operations. Attention is also given to the role of cultural sensitivity and selected Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) practices in shaping relationships between mining companies and local communities. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation involving community members, local leaders, civil society actors, and mining company representatives. The study is limited to stakeholder experiences and perceptions within the selected mining

communities and does not include quantitative analysis or comparative assessment with other mining districts or industrial sectors.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the qualitative case study design prioritises depth of understanding over broad generalisation; consequently, the findings reflect the specific experiences and perceptions of stakeholders in Shamva District and may not fully represent all mining communities in Zimbabwe. Second, the study relies largely on participant accounts obtained through interviews and focus group discussions, which may be influenced by personal experiences, perceptions, or social desirability biases. In addition, the research focuses specifically on Social Licence to Operate (SLO) within selected mining communities and does not examine the full spectrum of mining governance issues across the sector. While the study provides important insight into trust, community engagement, and stakeholder relations, broader comparative analysis involving other mining regions or quantitative approaches could provide additional perspectives. These limitations nevertheless do not diminish the value of the study, but rather highlight areas for

further research on mining governance and community relations in Zimbabwe.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Legitimacy Theory

The concept of organisational legitimacy was introduced by Dowling and Pfeffer (1975), who argued that organisations can only survive when their activities align with the norms, values, and expectations of the societies within which they operate. Legitimacy theory therefore suggests that organisations continuously seek social approval to maintain access to resources, stability, and public acceptance. More recent scholarship expands this understanding by emphasising that legitimacy is socially constructed and constantly negotiated between organisations and stakeholders (Schiopoiu-Burlea & Popa, 2022; Gottschalk & Hamerton, 2023).

Within extractive industries, Legitimacy Theory is particularly relevant because mining operations frequently generate social and environmental disruptions that directly affect host communities. Legal compliance alone is often insufficient to guarantee operational stability if communities perceive mining activities as harmful, exploitative, or

exclusionary. Consequently, legitimacy increasingly depends on how mining companies engage with local communities, respond to grievances, and demonstrate accountability. This aligns closely with the concept of Social Licence to Operate (SLO), which reflects broader community acceptance and trust beyond formal state approval.

In the Zimbabwean context, Legitimacy Theory provides an important framework for understanding tensions between mining companies and local communities. While mining companies may possess legal authority to operate, community resistance can emerge where operations are associated with environmental degradation, limited local benefits, displacement, or inadequate consultation. The theory, therefore, helps explain why mining companies must continuously negotiate social acceptance and maintain trust-based relationships with host communities to sustain long-term operations.

Social Licence to Operate and Mining Governance

A Social Licence to Operate (SLO) refers to the ongoing acceptance and approval of a company's activities by affected communities and stakeholders (Chipangamate, 2020). Unlike formal legal

licences issued by the state, SLO is informal, dynamic, and largely dependent on community perceptions of legitimacy, fairness, and trustworthiness. Existing literature consistently identifies SLO as increasingly important in extractive industries where mining activities generate significant environmental and social impacts (Komnitsas, 2020; Oshionebo, 2024).

Scholars generally agree that community trust, transparency, and stakeholder participation are central to securing SLO. However, debates exist regarding the extent to which Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives alone can sustain long-term legitimacy. Some studies argue that CSR programmes contribute significantly to positive community relations by supporting infrastructure, education, and local development projects. Others contend that communities increasingly evaluate mining companies through broader governance practices, including accountability, responsiveness, environmental stewardship, and inclusion in decision-making processes (Dare et al., 2014; Garcia-Ortega, 2018).

This debate is particularly relevant in developing countries, where mining governance is often shaped by institutional

weaknesses, political influence, and unequal power relations. In many African mining regions, communities continue to experience exclusion from decision-making despite the existence of CSR initiatives and legal protections. Consequently, SLO is increasingly understood not simply as a corporate reputation tool, but as a governance process involving negotiation, legitimacy, and social accountability.

In Zimbabwe, these governance dynamics are especially pronounced. Mining remains central to economic policy and foreign investment attraction, yet the sector continues to face criticism linked to environmental degradation, unequal benefit-sharing, and weak community participation. The expansion of foreign-owned mining operations, particularly involving Chinese investors, has intensified concerns regarding transparency, labour practices, environmental management, and local inclusion. Several studies have highlighted growing tensions between mining companies and communities in resource-rich districts, where communities often perceive mining governance systems as favouring political and corporate interests over local welfare. These conditions make SLO particularly significant within Zimbabwe's mining sector.

Trust, Transparency, and Community Engagement

Existing literature consistently identifies trust as a foundational component of Social Licence to Operate. Trust influences how communities interpret mining activities, assess company intentions, and respond to project-related impacts. Research suggests that communities are more likely to support mining operations where companies demonstrate honesty, transparency, responsiveness, and respect for local concerns (Garcia-Ortega, 2018).

Transparency and communication are widely regarded as critical trust-building mechanisms. Studies show that inadequate consultation, secrecy surrounding mining agreements, and failure to communicate project impacts often contribute to community mistrust and conflict. Conversely, companies that maintain regular engagement with communities and provide accessible information regarding operations, environmental management, and compensation processes are more likely to secure legitimacy and cooperation (Hurst et al., 2022).

Community engagement is similarly recognised as essential to sustainable mining governance. However,

scholars differ on the quality and depth of engagement required to sustain SLO. Some studies view consultation meetings and CSR programmes as adequate mechanisms for stakeholder inclusion, while others argue that meaningful participation requires communities to be actively involved in decision-making processes affecting land use, livelihoods, and environmental management. This distinction is important because superficial consultation may create the appearance of participation without genuinely addressing community concerns.

In Zimbabwe, community engagement within the mining sector has often been criticised as inconsistent and largely transactional. Mining companies frequently engage communities through short-term CSR projects while broader concerns regarding environmental degradation, displacement, and local economic exclusion remain unresolved. As a result, trust deficits continue to shape relationships between mining companies and host communities, particularly in areas where communities perceive limited accountability from both companies and state institutions.

Environmental Stewardship and Cultural Sensitivity

Environmental stewardship remains a central determinant of SLO within mining

communities. Mining activities frequently affect water sources, agricultural land, forests, and local ecosystems, making environmental management critical to community acceptance. Studies show that communities are more likely to support mining projects where companies demonstrate commitment to environmental protection, rehabilitation, and sustainable resource management (Stuart et al., 2022).

At the same time, cultural sensitivity plays an important role in shaping perceptions of legitimacy. Communities often attach cultural, spiritual, and historical significance to land and natural resources. Failure to recognise local traditions, leadership structures, and customary practices can therefore undermine trust and intensify resistance to mining operations. Scholars increasingly argue that culturally insensitive mining practices weaken SLO by creating perceptions of disrespect and exclusion.

These issues are particularly relevant in Zimbabwe, where rural communities maintain strong cultural and historical connections to land. In districts such as Shamva, tensions between mining companies and local communities are not only economic or environmental but also cultural and social. Respect for traditional leadership structures, local customs, and

community identity therefore, becomes important in shaping how mining companies are perceived within host communities.

Social Licence to Operate and Operational Stability

The literature further suggests that a strong SLO contributes significantly to operational stability within extractive industries. Companies with positive community relationships are less likely to experience protests, operational disruptions, reputational damage, or project delays (Veh et al., 2018). Community support also enhances investor confidence and improves long-term sustainability.

However, scholars increasingly caution against reducing SLO to a purely risk-management strategy. While companies often pursue SLO to minimise conflict and secure operational continuity, critics argue that SLO should also be understood within broader debates on social justice, accountability, and equitable development. In contexts characterised by governance weaknesses and unequal power relations, SLO becomes intertwined with broader struggles over participation, resource control, and local rights.

Research Gap

Although existing scholarship has extensively examined Corporate Social

Responsibility (CSR), environmental impacts, and community conflicts within the mining sector, relatively limited research has explored how Social Licence to Operate (SLO) is negotiated within Zimbabwe's mining communities, particularly in relation to trust, political influence, and foreign-owned mining operations. Much of the literature treats community acceptance as a by-product of CSR initiatives, with insufficient attention given to the broader governance processes through which legitimacy is constructed or undermined. Furthermore, limited empirical research has examined how local communities in districts such as Shamva perceive mining companies and evaluate their social legitimacy.

This study addresses this gap by examining the factors shaping Social Licence to Operate and trust between mining companies and local communities in Shamva District, Zimbabwe. In doing so, the research contributes to broader debates on extractive governance, community participation, and sustainable mining practices in developing economies.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the qualitative approach and case study design to examine the role of Social Licence to Operate (SLO)

in shaping trust and relationships between mining companies and local communities in Shamva District, Zimbabwe. The qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to explore stakeholder experiences, perceptions, and interpretations relating to mining operations, community engagement, and social legitimacy within their natural contexts (Bryman, 2012).

The study was guided by an interpretivist research philosophy, which assumes that social reality is constructed through human interaction and subjective interpretation (Matta, 2022). This philosophical position was suitable because perceptions of trust, legitimacy, and community acceptance vary across stakeholder groups and are shaped by social, political, and cultural experiences. Ontologically, the study was grounded in constructivism, recognising that different stakeholders interpret mining governance differently depending on their lived experiences. Epistemologically, the research adopted an interpretive stance focused on understanding the meanings participants attach to mining activities and community-company relations (Spencer et al., 2014).

A case study design was employed to facilitate an in-depth investigation of

SLO within the specific socio-economic and political context of Shamva District. Case studies are particularly useful for examining complex governance dynamics and stakeholder interactions within real-life settings (Yin, 2017). Shamva District was purposively selected because of its extensive mining activities and the recurring tensions involving mining companies, environmental concerns, and community participation.

The study employed purposive sampling, specifically maximum variation sampling, to capture diverse perspectives relating to Social Licence to Operate. The target population included community members, traditional leaders, civil society actors, and mining company representatives within selected mining communities in Shamva District. Approximately 45 participants were selected based on their relevance to the study and their direct or indirect involvement in mining-related activities and stakeholder processes.

Participants were included if they possessed knowledge or experience relating to mining operations, environmental impacts, community engagement, or local governance issues and were willing to participate voluntarily. Individuals without a meaningful connection to mining

activities or those unable to provide informed consent were excluded. Efforts were made to include participants from different social and occupational backgrounds to ensure diversity of perspectives.

Access to participants was negotiated through local gatekeepers, including traditional leaders and civil society organisations familiar with mining communities in the district. Initial engagement focused on explaining the purpose of the study, assuring participants of confidentiality, and building trust within communities. This process was particularly important given the political and economic sensitivities often associated with mining governance in Zimbabwe.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with community members, local leaders, civil society representatives, and mining company personnel to gather detailed insights into perceptions of trust, transparency, community engagement, environmental management, and mining legitimacy. The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to discuss issues they considered important while enabling the researcher to probe emerging

themes and experiences (Guest et al., 2006).

Participant observation complemented interview data by providing direct insight into interactions between mining companies and local communities. Observations were conducted during community meetings, stakeholder engagement activities, and selected mining-related interactions within the district. This approach enabled the researcher to observe communication patterns, participation dynamics, and community responses within natural settings (Uwamusi & Ajisebiyawo, 2023).

To strengthen the credibility and reliability of the findings, the study employed data triangulation by comparing information obtained from different participant groups and data generation methods. The use of multiple sources of evidence enhanced the trustworthiness and depth of the analysis.

The study was analytically guided by Legitimacy Theory, which explains how organisations seek social acceptance and approval within the societies in which they operate (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). The framework was useful for understanding how mining companies negotiate trust, legitimacy, and community acceptance beyond formal legal compliance.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach. The analysis involved coding recurring ideas and experiences, identifying thematic patterns, and organising themes into broader analytical categories. Key themes emerging from the data included trust and transparency, community participation, environmental concerns, cultural sensitivity, and perceptions of legitimacy.

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the omission of identifying details. Given the sensitivities surrounding mining governance in Zimbabwe, particular care was taken to ensure that participation did not expose individuals to potential risks or reprisals.

However, the study has several limitations. First, the qualitative case study design prioritises depth of understanding over broad generalisation; therefore, the findings reflect the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders in Shamva District and may not fully represent all mining communities in Zimbabwe. Second, the study relied largely on participant accounts, which may have been influenced

by personal experiences or social desirability biases. Nevertheless, the research provides important context-specific insights into trust, legitimacy, and Social Licence to Operate within Zimbabwe's mining sector.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following themes emerged from an analysis of the findings:

Community Engagement and Trust

Community engagement emerged as one of the most significant factors shaping Social Licence to Operate (SLO) in Shamva District. Participants consistently indicated that mining companies that maintained open communication and involved communities in decision-making processes were more likely to gain trust and community acceptance. However, many respondents argued that engagement processes were often inconsistent and conducted only after major operational decisions had already been made.

One community participant explained:

"Most of the time they only come to inform us after decisions have already been made. They rarely ask what the community wants before starting operations." (Community Participant 7)

Similarly, a traditional leader noted:

“People become frustrated because they feel excluded. Companies engage politicians more than the community itself.” (Traditional Leader 2)

These findings suggest that perceptions of exclusion significantly weaken trust and undermine the legitimacy of mining operations. While several mining companies conducted consultation meetings and occasional outreach activities, participants frequently viewed these engagements as symbolic rather than genuinely participatory. This finding aligns with studies arguing that superficial consultation weakens SLO by creating the appearance of participation without meaningful community inclusion (Dare et al., 2014).

The findings further revealed that early engagement plays a critical role in shaping community perceptions. Participants were generally more supportive of mining projects where companies consulted communities before commencing operations and maintained regular communication throughout the project lifecycle.

Transparency and Perceptions of Legitimacy

Transparency emerged as another critical factor influencing SLO. Participants

emphasized that communities were more likely to trust mining companies that openly communicated information relating to environmental impacts, employment opportunities, compensation arrangements, and community development commitments.

A community member stated:

“The problem is that we are rarely told the truth about what is happening. People only hear rumours because companies do not communicate openly.” (Community Participant 11)

Another participant added:

“If companies explain their activities properly and involve the community, people are more willing to cooperate.” (Community Participant 4)

These findings indicate that limited transparency contributes significantly to mistrust and suspicion within mining communities. Several respondents expressed frustration over the lack of accessible information regarding mining agreements, environmental management practices, and revenue distribution. Communities often interpreted secrecy and inconsistent communication as indicators of exploitation or hidden political interests.

The findings support existing literature emphasizing that transparency and

accountability are central components of SLO because they influence how communities evaluate the legitimacy and credibility of mining companies (Garcia-Ortega, 2018).

Corporate Social Responsibility and Community Expectations

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives were widely recognised as important in shaping community perceptions of mining companies. Participants acknowledged that some companies had invested in schools, road rehabilitation, water infrastructure, and health-related initiatives. These interventions were generally viewed positively, particularly where they addressed immediate community needs.

One participant remarked:

“Some companies have helped with roads and school repairs, and people appreciate that.” (Community Participant 15)

However, respondents also argued that CSR initiatives alone were insufficient to secure long-term trust where broader governance concerns remained unresolved. Several participants perceived some CSR activities as temporary or symbolic efforts aimed at reducing criticism rather than addressing structural community concerns.

A civil society participant observed:

“Giving donations is not enough if communities are still excluded from decisions affecting their land and environment.” (Civil Society Representative 1)

These findings suggest that communities increasingly evaluate mining companies beyond short-term charitable activities. Instead, legitimacy appears to depend more broadly on responsiveness, participation, environmental responsibility, and fairness in benefit-sharing. This finding reflects growing scholarly debates that question whether CSR alone can sustain Social Licence to Operate in contexts characterised by unequal power relations and governance weaknesses.

Political Influence and Foreign-Owned Mining Operations

The findings further revealed significant community concerns regarding political influence and foreign-owned mining operations, particularly involving some Chinese investors. Several participants expressed perceptions that certain mining companies operated with political protection, making it difficult for communities to challenge environmental damage or raise grievances effectively.

One participant stated:

“People complain, but nothing changes because these companies are connected to powerful politicians.” (Community Participant 9)

A local leader similarly noted:

“Communities sometimes feel powerless because companies appear protected even when there are environmental problems.” (Traditional Leader 4)

Participants frequently associated these concerns with weak regulatory enforcement, limited accountability, and inadequate consultation processes. Several respondents argued that some foreign-owned mining operations prioritised mineral extraction over community welfare, contributing to tensions relating to land degradation, water pollution, and limited local benefits.

Importantly, these perceptions significantly influenced trust and community acceptance. The findings indicate that SLO in Zimbabwe is shaped not only by company-community relations, but also by broader governance dynamics involving political authority, regulatory institutions, and foreign investment practices. This highlights the importance of institutional accountability in strengthening community trust and legitimacy within the mining sector.

Cultural Sensitivity and Community Acceptance

Cultural sensitivity also emerged as an important factor influencing SLO. Participants indicated that mining companies that respected local traditions, leadership structures, and cultural practices were more likely to gain community acceptance.

One traditional leader explained:

“Communities want companies to respect local customs and consult traditional leaders before making major decisions.” (Traditional Leader 1)

Participants also highlighted concerns regarding mining activities occurring near culturally significant sites, including burial grounds and sacred areas. Failure to recognise these cultural dimensions was frequently interpreted as disrespectful and contributed to resistance toward mining operations.

The findings suggest that SLO extends beyond economic compensation or infrastructure development. Community perceptions of legitimacy are also shaped by whether mining companies demonstrate respect for local identity, traditions, and social structures. This supports literature arguing that culturally insensitive practices

can undermine trust and intensify conflict within mining communities.

Social Licence to Operate and Operational Stability

The study further found that companies perceived as having stronger community relationships experienced fewer operational disruptions and conflicts. Participants noted that communities were generally more cooperative where companies maintained consistent engagement, addressed grievances promptly, and demonstrated accountability.

A mining company representative stated:

“When communities trust the company, operations become smoother because there is less conflict and resistance.” (Mining Company Representative 2)

Conversely, companies perceived as unresponsive or secretive often faced hostility, protests, and community resistance. Participants described cases involving disputes over environmental damage, employment opportunities, and land access, which occasionally disrupted mining activities.

These findings reinforce arguments within existing literature that SLO contributes directly to operational stability by reducing conflict and strengthening cooperation between companies and host

communities (Veh et al., 2018). However, the findings also demonstrate that operational stability cannot be achieved through legal compliance alone. Rather, it depends on sustained trust-building, meaningful participation, transparency, and responsiveness to community concerns.

Overall, the findings highlight that Social Licence to Operate within Zimbabwe’s mining sector is deeply shaped by trust, governance practices, community participation, and perceptions of fairness. While CSR initiatives and consultation processes remain important, communities increasingly evaluate mining companies through broader issues of accountability, transparency, and inclusion. The findings further suggest that political influence and weak regulatory oversight continue to undermine community trust and complicate efforts to build sustainable relationships between mining companies and local communities in Shamva District.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen Social Licence to Operate (SLO) and improve relationships between mining companies and local communities in Zimbabwe’s mining sector.

Strengthening Community Engagement

Mining companies should adopt more inclusive and participatory community engagement approaches. Community consultation should occur continuously throughout the mining project lifecycle rather than only during periods of conflict or project initiation. Local communities, traditional leaders, women, youth groups, and civil society organisations should be meaningfully involved in decision-making processes relating to land use, environmental management, and community development initiatives. Early engagement before the commencement of mining activities is particularly important in building trust and reducing resistance.

The study also highlights the need to minimise political interference in community engagement processes. Genuine dialogue between mining companies and communities is often undermined where local grievances are filtered through political interests rather than addressed directly. Strengthening independent community participation mechanisms would therefore enhance trust and legitimacy within mining governance processes.

Promoting Transparency and Accountability

Mining companies should improve transparency regarding environmental impacts, compensation processes, employment opportunities, and community development commitments. Communities are more likely to trust mining operations where information is communicated openly and consistently. Regular feedback meetings and accessible communication platforms should therefore be established to strengthen accountability and reduce misinformation.

Government institutions also have an important role in strengthening regulatory oversight. The study recommends stronger enforcement of environmental and social regulations, together with independent monitoring systems to assess compliance with labour, environmental, and community engagement standards. Improving institutional accountability would help reduce perceptions of political favouritism and strengthen public confidence in mining governance systems.

Strengthening Corporate Social Responsibility Initiatives

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives should move beyond short-term donations and focus on long-

term community development priorities. Mining companies should prioritise investments in education, healthcare, water infrastructure, and local economic development programmes that produce sustainable benefits for host communities. The findings further suggest the importance of supporting local entrepreneurship and skills development initiatives that create economic opportunities beyond mining activities. Communities are more likely to support mining operations where they perceive tangible and lasting developmental benefits.

Enhancing Cultural Sensitivity and Social Inclusion

Mining companies should demonstrate greater respect for local traditions, cultural practices, and traditional leadership structures. Community perceptions of legitimacy are strongly influenced by whether companies acknowledge local identities and engage respectfully with community institutions. Cultural sensitivity training for mining personnel and continuous engagement with traditional leaders could therefore strengthen community acceptance and reduce tensions.

Overall, achieving and sustaining Social Licence to Operate in Zimbabwe's mining sector requires more than legal

compliance or isolated CSR interventions. It requires sustained trust-building, transparency, meaningful participation, and accountable governance practices that place local communities at the centre of mining development processes.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of Social Licence to Operate (SLO) in shaping trust and relationships between mining companies and local communities in Shamva District, Zimbabwe. The findings demonstrate that securing community acceptance extends beyond obtaining formal legal licences and requires sustained efforts to build legitimacy, trust, and meaningful engagement with host communities. Community perceptions of mining operations were strongly influenced by the quality of stakeholder engagement, levels of transparency, and responsiveness to local concerns, environmental stewardship, and respect for local cultural practices.

The study further revealed that inadequate consultation, weak transparency, and perceptions of political interference continue to undermine trust between mining companies and local communities. Concerns surrounding some foreign-owned mining operations,

particularly regarding environmental management, accountability, and exclusion from decision-making processes, contributed to community resentment and weakened social legitimacy. While Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives were generally appreciated, participants emphasized that short-term donations alone are insufficient to secure long-term trust where broader governance concerns remain unresolved.

Importantly, the findings show that Social Licence to Operate is closely linked to operational stability. Mining companies that maintained stronger community relationships experienced fewer conflicts and greater cooperation from local stakeholders. Conversely, weak engagement practices and limited accountability often intensified tensions and resistance toward mining operations.

The study, therefore, concludes that achieving sustainable mining governance in Zimbabwe requires more inclusive and transparent engagement processes that prioritise community participation, institutional accountability, and cultural sensitivity. Strengthening Social Licence to Operate is not only essential for reducing conflict and improving operational stability, but also for promoting socially responsible and sustainable resource governance within mining communities.

REFERENCES

- Bice, S. & Moffat, K. (2014). Social licence to operate and impact assessment. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 32(4), 257–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14615517.2014.950122>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. Retrieved from Tandfonline.
- Buhmann, K. (2016). Corporate Social Responsibility: The Role of Law and Regulation. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility* (pp. 699–719). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chipangamate, N. S. (2020). *The process of constructing and maintaining a social licence to operate in a developing market*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pretoria. Retrieved from University of Pretoria.
- Creswell, J. W. & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Dare, M., Schirmer, J. & Vanclay, F. (2014). Community engagement

- and social licence to operate. *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 32(3), 188-197. Retrieved from University of Canberra.
- Ekechukwu, C. J., Nwogbo, V. C. & Ajaero, I. D. (2023). Relevance of Corporate Reputation Management Practice in the University of Calabar, Nigeria. *International Journal of International Relations, Media and Mass Communication Studies*, 9(3), 40-51. Retrieved from EA Journals.
- Eldh, A. C. & Berterö, C. (2020). Quotations in Qualitative Studies: Reflections on Constituents, Custom, and Purpose. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. Retrieved from Academia.
- Gabay, G., Hackett, P. M. W. & Hayre, C. (2023). Philosophical perspectives on qualitative psychological and social science research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14. Retrieved from Frontiers.
- Garcia-Ortega, B. (2018). CEO letters: Social license to operate and community involvement in the mining industry. *Business Ethics: A European Review*. Retrieved from Academia.
- Gottschalk, P. & Hamerton, C. (2023). Legitimacy and the Corporate Social License. In *Corporate Social License* (pp. 101-130). Springer. Retrieved from SpringerLink.
- Governance Institute of Australia. (2022). Achieving, maintaining, and repairing social licence to operate. Retrieved from Governance Institute of Australia.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A. & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough?: An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59-82. Retrieved from SAGE Journals.
- Gukurume, S. & Matsika, A. (2022). Chinese mining investments and community relations in Zimbabwe: Contestations, livelihoods and local governance. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 40(3), 411–427. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2022.2035708>
- Hurst, B., Johnston, K. & Lane, A. B. (2022). Achieving, maintaining, and repairing social licence to operate. *Governance Directions*, 74(1), 490-493. Retrieved from QUT ePrints.

- Jijelava, D. & Vanclay, F. (2017). Legitimacy, credibility and trust as the key components of a social licence to operate: An analysis of BP's projects in Georgia. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 140, 1077–1086.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.10.070>
- Komnitsas, K. (2020). Social License to Operate in Mining: Present Views and Future Trends. *Resources*, 9(6), 79. Retrieved from MDPI.
- Kothari, C. R. (2004). *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques* (2nd ed.). New Age International Publishers.
- Marshall, C. & Rossman, G. B. (2010). *Designing Qualitative Research* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from Sage Publications.
- Mason, M. (2010). Sample size and saturation in PhD studies using qualitative interviews. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11(3). Retrieved from ResearchGate.
- Matta, C. (2022). Philosophical Paradigms in Qualitative Research Methods Education: What is their Pedagogical Role? *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 66(6), 1049–1062. Retrieved from Tandfonline.
- MiningWorld. (2025). How Social Licensing is Transforming Mining Practices. Retrieved from MiningWorld.
- Mkodzongi, G. & Spiegel, S. (2019). Artisanal gold mining and farming: Livelihood linkages and labour dynamics after land reforms in Zimbabwe. *Journal of Development Studies*, 55(10), 2145–2161.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2018.1516869>
- Moffat, K. & Zhang, A. (2014). The paths to social licence to operate: An integrative model explaining community acceptance of mining. *Resources Policy*, 39, 61–70.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2013.11.003>
- Mutondoro, F. & Ncube, M. (2021). Mining, communities and environmental justice in Zimbabwe. *African Journal of Governance and Development*, 10(1), 88–104.
- Oshionebo, E. (2024). Obtaining the Social Licence to Operate Through Community Consultation: A Case Study of the African Mining

- Industry. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Social License to Operate and Energy Transitions*. Retrieved from Springer.
- Owen, J. R. & Kemp, D. (2013). Social licence and mining: A critical perspective. *Resources Policy*, 38(1), 29–35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2012.06.016>
- Palinkas, L. A., Horwitz, S. M., Green, C. A., Wisdom, J. P., Duan, N. & Hoagwood, K. (2015). Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 42(5), 533-544. Retrieved from SpringerLink.
- Saunders, M. L., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A. (2009). *Research Methods for Business Students* (5th ed.). Pearson Education.
- Saunders, R. & Carment, D. (2023). Resource governance, political settlements and extractive sector accountability in Zimbabwe.
- Schiopoiu-Burlea, A. & Popa, I. (2022). Legitimacy Theory. In *Encyclopedia of Corporate Social Responsibility* (pp. 1579-1584). Springer. Retrieved from SpringerLink.
- Sekaran, U. & Bougie, R. (2013). *Research Methods for Business: A Skill-Building Approach* (6th ed.). John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
- Social Impact Assessment. (2023). "Social Licence to Operate - Social Impact Assessment." Social Impact Assessment. Retrieved from Social Impact Assessment.
- Spencer, R., Pryce, J. M. & Walsh, J. (2014). Philosophical Approaches to Qualitative Research. In *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Retrieved from Oxford Academic.
- Stuart, A., Bond, A., Franco, A., Baker, J., Gerrard, C., Danino, V. & Jones, K. (2022). Conceptualising Social Licence to Operate. SSRN. Retrieved from SSRN.
- Uwamusi, C. B. & Ajisebiyawo, A. (2023). Participant Observation as Research Methodology: Assessing the Defects of Qualitative Observational Data as Research Tools. *Asian Journal of Social Science and Management*

Technology, 5(3), 2313-7410.

Retrieved from AJSSMT.

Vanclay, F. & Esteves, A. M. (2024).

Handbook of Social Impact Assessment: Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities.

Retrieved from IAIA.

Veh, A., Göbel, M. & Vogel, R. (2018).

Corporate reputation in management research: a review of the literature and assessment of the concept. *Business Research*, 11(2), 235-270. Retrieved from ResearchGate.

Yin, R. K. (2017). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. Sage Publications.