

Land, Lithium, Lime and Lies: Magunje's Unequal Bargain

Centre for Natural Resources Governance

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A feature on corporate overreach and rural resistance in Zimbabwe's mineral-rich rural communities of Magunje, Hurungwe district.

Magunje, Zimbabwe – In the remote parts of Mashonaland West's Magunje district, a modest workshop of 30 villagers convened to discuss something far larger than themselves. At first glance, it looked like a routine development consultation. But the gathering, hosted by the Centre for Natural Resource Governance (CNRG), was an emergency assembly, a reckoning with the broken promises, environmental damage, and legal grey zones that have come to define Zimbabwe's 21st-century scramble for critical minerals.

Beneath the banners of “clean energy” and “climate-smart development,” a bitter conflict is playing out in the shadow of the Lebanon Investment Cement Project, a Chinese-backed industrial undertaking that is fast transforming this rural enclave into a battleground between the powerful and the forgotten.

Concrete without Consent

For years, Magunje has quietly endured its marginal status — a typical rural district with subsistence farming, some irrigation schemes, and deep historical ties to the land. That changed when lithium and lime were discovered. Almost overnight, large lorries and heavy machinery rolled in, armed with paperwork and police escorts but few explanations. Some rolled in the cloak of the night.

Residents of Chasara and Kapere villages, whose ancestors settled the area centuries ago, some displaced from Kariba during the dam's construction in 1958, found themselves on the wrong side of

Zimbabwe's extractive boom. They were called squatters on their land. Their gardens were razed, graves flattened by bulldozers, and those who protested were arrested, sometimes at night, under the watchful gaze of armed officers.

At the heart of the uproar lies a single question: Who gave the Chinese investor the right to operate here?

The Theatre of Consultation

According to villagers and Chief Nematombo, the traditional authority over the area, they were never consulted. A "stakeholder meeting" purportedly held on 25 May 2024 was neither in the village nor about the village. Hosted at Birimahwe Centre at ward level, the gathering was called off after objections from district officials, who acknowledged it should have taken place at the village level. Despite this, Lebanon Investment, consultants reportedly used the sign-in sheets to suggest community approval.

The deceit, say locals, was followed by force. In one chilling account, seven villagers approached their farmland late one evening after spotting trucks and flashing lights. They were ordered to lie face down by police and taken away in a Mahindra vehicle. "We were just trying to protect our land," one participant said. "Now we are treated like criminals."

Even the judiciary has proven no sanctuary. Community members have attended court five times in pursuit of an ownership verdict. Each time, the Chinese have continued building.

Rights, Rhetoric, and Realities

The Magunje workshop, while modest in scale, offered a rare space for villagers to tell their stories. Testimonies painted a vivid story of displacement, fear, and structural exclusion. Three women and five men from Chasara have been arrested. In Kapere, even the headman spent time in police custody. "If you ask questions, you are arrested," said one resident.

Food insecurity has set in. Irrigation systems have been compromised by cement dust and dam pollution. "The water we now drink looks like orange crush," lamented one villager. Crops like maize, bananas, and sweet potatoes, the lifeblood of these households, have been flattened by trucks or left untended in now-unusable fields.

The Chinese investor, meanwhile, insists the project will employ 5,000 people. But recruitment appears entangled in political patronage. "If you are not ZANU PF, you don't get the job," locals say. The promise of modern housing in affluent Borrowdale, floated as compensation, has been dismissed as farcical.

"Five years of tobacco farming would give me more than a house in Harare," another resident scoffed.

Grave Injustice

Perhaps most provocative is the desecration of ancestral graves, viewed as symbols of deep spiritual and historical continuity in Zimbabwean culture. "They told us graves over 100 years old don't matter," a woman said. Bulldozers have already flattened sacred ground where four royal ancestors are buried. In local culture, this is not just physical destruction; it is a violation of identity and cosmic order.

The Environmental Management Agency (EMA), the body tasked with assessing such projects, has remained curiously mute. While a site plan was reportedly only drafted *after* the consultative process, no updated assessments or public disclosures have followed. The Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Lands visited, villagers say, but little changed. The “gazetted” status of the land is still under dispute — a term that, for many, only entered their lexicon when their homes were marked for demolition.

Despite Zimbabwe’s rhetoric of resource nationalism and sovereignty, the Magunje case suggests a more unsettling dynamic: development shaped not by policy but by political networks, opaque deals, and authoritarian enforcement. “Zvine vakuru mukati” (“this involves powerful people”) has become the catch-all explanation villagers receive when they raise concerns. It is an admission, or perhaps a resignation, to the idea that justice is out of reach.

A letter from the government confirms this as a top politician wrote to the local authority directing that the company be given access to the land.

The Chinese juggernaut has also rolled on to Kemapondo village deep into the heart of Hurungwe district, where the lime and lithium mining is taking place. Amid the drone of machinery and a cloud of industrial smoke, villagers are struggling to move on with life.

In the rugged terrain, convoys of lorries ferrying minerals for processing are causing massive dust pollution and further straining the dilapidated local asphalt roads, impassable in some parts. The drive of 38 kilometres required two and a half hours of precarious navigation.



A lorry raises dust ferrying lime from Kemapondo village onwards for processing at a cement plant in Magunje

At one homestead, which is directly in the middle of the mine operations, a family lamented how they have lost their livelihoods, with their cattle forcibly moved from their property to their in-laws. Their young children are forced to wear masks as the choking soot from the mine affects them daily.

At least nine families are awaiting relocation without any knowledge of when this will be. No clear structure of compensation has been laid out by the mine, which has since deferred responsibility to the local minister of state for Miriam Chombo.

CNRG documented grievances, proposed community-led monitoring mechanisms, and called for formal employment contracts, relocation frameworks, and clean energy investments. But these are stopgap measures without real structural accountability.

Whose Clean Energy?

The global race for critical minerals — lithium in particular — has seen countries like Zimbabwe touted as pivotal suppliers for the green transition. Yet here in Magunje, that future is being built on unstable ethical foundations. The promise of clean energy abroad is being bankrolled by dirty tactics at home.

Until local voices are treated not as obstacles but as essential stakeholders, Magunje's story risks becoming a tragic parable: where sustainability is preached, but not practiced; where rights are codified, but not respected.

And where, ultimately, the concrete dries faster than justice ever will.

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