

## **New Frontiers for Human Rights Due Diligence in Technology & Critical Minerals Value Chains**

Speaker: Justice Chinhema, General Secretary, Zimbabwe Diamond and Allied Minerals Workers Union (ZDAMWU)

My name is Justice Chinhema, the General Secretary of the Zimbabwe Diamond and Allied Minerals Workers Union. I bring to this panel the voices of mine workers and communities from Zimbabwe' & Africa's broader mining sector, who stand at the beginning of the critical minerals value chain that powers today's technology and the global green transition.

Mining is celebrated as the bloodline of our countries' economies, but for too many workers, it has also meant blood, sweat, and broken bodies. Inadequate wages, unsafe working conditions, rampant casualisation of labour, sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence are the order of the day in many operations, creating a hostile and often dangerous working environment.

Communities around diamond, gold, lithium and other mineral projects face polluted water, loss of land, and intimidation when they demand justice.

### **Why HRDD matters to us**

For us as workers, human rights due diligence cannot be a glossy report prepared for investors far away. HRDD must mean fewer accidents underground, living wages, secure jobs instead of endless casual contracts, respect for trade union rights, and access to real

remedy when harm occurs. In Zimbabwe today, almost 40% of recorded human rights violations by businesses are linked to the mining sector, which shows clearly that voluntary approaches are not enough.

At the same time, global demand for lithium and other transition minerals driven by technology, batteries and renewable energy value chains, particularly in the EU and other major markets. New regulations on critical raw materials and batteries, together with evolving human rights and environmental due diligence laws, are reshaping expectations along these value chains.

New frontiers for HRDD – our perspective

From where we stand as a union in Zimbabwe, the new frontiers for HRDD in technology and critical minerals should include at least three shifts:

### **1. From voluntarism to binding rules**

Governments in both producing and consuming countries must adopt and enforce binding human rights and environmental due diligence laws that cover the entire value chain, from the mine to the data centre, battery, or device. In Zimbabwe, HRDD principles should be integrated into mining, labour, and environmental laws so that no investor receives a “special status” that overrides workers’ rights and community protections.

### **2. Putting workers and communities at the centre**

Workers and communities must be recognised as rights-holders and partners in due diligence, not simply as “risks” to be managed.

Freedom of association and collective bargaining are not optional; they are the foundation of effective HRDD because organised workers are the best early-warning system for human rights risks. Downstream tech and battery companies should not rely only on audits and consultants; they must speak directly with unions and community representatives at mine level in Zimbabwe and across the region.

### **3. Extending HRDD to technology risks**

Technology companies must go beyond looking upstream at mining; they need to examine how their products and digital tools are used in workplaces and societies. New frontiers for HRDD include preventing the use of surveillance technologies systems to monitor workers, undermine unions, or silence communities that defend their rights.

Our concrete demands

As ZDAMWU and as part of the broader labour movement, we are calling for:

- Companies sourcing from Zimbabwe to map their supply chains to mine level and disclose their suppliers, so that workers and communities know who holds the power and responsibility further down the chain.
- Joint risk assessments with unions and communities in high-risk sites, focusing on safety, wages, gender-based violence and harassment, and environmental and land impacts.

- Purchasing practices that support decent work: long-term contracts, no retaliation against worker representatives, and pricing that allows for living wages and investment in safety.
- Accessible grievance mechanisms co-designed with workers and communities, with guarantees against reprisals and clear pathways to remedy.

We are also building alliances with unions and civil society in other regions to engage EU and global buyers who profit from Africa's minerals but are often invisible to the people at the bottom of the chain.

## **Closing**

If HRDD is to be truly a “new frontier”, it must move from paper to practice, from boardrooms in the Global North to the open pits and underground shafts of places like Marange, Murowa and Zimbabwe's emerging lithium fields. That journey will only succeed if workers and communities are treated not as collateral damage of development, but as central partners in shaping a just energy and digital transition.

As ZDAMWU, we stand ready to work with governments, companies, investors and civil society to make that a reality – but we will also continue to organise, to speak out, and to resist any model of development that comes at the expense of human dignity.

**What worker organising has achieved in Zimbabwe's mining sector is real, though incomplete.** Through organising, workers have built a stronger collective voice, improved representation at

workplace level, pushed issues of wages and safety onto the national agenda, and secured a clearer role in sectoral bargaining, the National Employment Council for mining.

### What has been achieved?

Worker organising has helped miners move from being isolated individuals to a collective force able to negotiate, speak out, and demand dignity at work. ZDAMWU has reported training shop-floor leaders in collective bargaining and dispute resolution, which strengthens workers' ability to engage management and defend their rights.

Another important gain is that labour issues in mining are now harder to ignore. Public pressure from unions has kept attention on unsafe working conditions, low wages, salary arrears, casualisation, and violations linked to some employers, including foreign-owned operations.

### What remains?

The biggest unfinished task is to convert organising power into decent work for all mine workers. Low wages, casualisation, delayed salaries, weak social protection, and job insecurity remain widespread, and the union has said many workers still lack medical insurance and face hazardous conditions.

Safety and health remain urgent. Reports continue to show exposure to toxic chemicals, poor ventilation, inadequate protective equipment, and recurring injuries and fatalities, which means occupational safety

cannot remain a slogan — it must be enforced consistently in every mine.

A further challenge is fragmentation and weak enforcement. The union has pointed to the problem of multiple unions dividing worker power, while labour rights protections are still undermined by weak compliance, poor oversight, and the need for stronger implementation of collective bargaining and safety laws.

**“Worker organising in Zimbabwe’s mining sector has achieved something fundamental: it has turned miners from scattered voices into an organised force capable of negotiating, influencing policy, and defending dignity at work. We have made progress in representation, bargaining, and awareness of safety and labour rights. But the struggle is far from over. Workers still face low pay, casualisation, salary arrears, unsafe workplaces, and weak social protection. Our task now is to deepen unity, strengthen enforcement, and ensure that the wealth of our minerals is matched by decent jobs and safe conditions for the people who produce it.”**

Shorter version

**“Organising has given mine workers a stronger voice, better representation, and a seat at the table through collective bargaining structures. But we still have to tackle low wages, casualisation, unsafe conditions, salary arrears, and weak enforcement so that mining benefits workers as much as it benefits the economy.”**

## **Opening Statement (2–3 minutes)**

Good morning, distinguished panellists, colleagues and friends.

My name is Justice Chinhema. I am the General Secretary of the Zimbabwe Diamond and Allied Minerals Workers Union, ZDAMWU. I speak today not from a boardroom or a policy institute, but from the mines – from the workers whose hands extract the lithium, cobalt and other critical minerals that power the smartphones, electric vehicles and data centers driving the global technology and green transition.

Africa is no longer just a supplier of raw materials. Our continent holds some of the world's most strategic minerals for digitalization and decarbonization. Yet despite this centrality, most of the value in these supply chains is still captured far from our shores, while our workers continue to breathe dust, not dividends.

We are told that this new wave of investment in African critical minerals is "green" and "responsible." But on the ground, in Zimbabwe and across the continent, we see a different reality. Communities are displaced from their land without adequate consultation or compensation. Pollution contaminates water sources. And workers – the very people who make this green transition possible – face precarious employment, unsafe working conditions, poverty wages and systematic attacks on their right to organise.

Human Rights Due Diligence, or HRDD, is now moving from voluntary corporate social responsibility rhetoric to binding legal obligations under frameworks like the UN Guiding Principles, OECD guidance, emerging EU supply chain laws, and our own Africa Mining Vision. This is progress. But here is the uncomfortable truth: HRDD that does not meaningfully involve workers and communities in Africa is not due diligence. It is public relations.

Let me be specific. In Zimbabwe, we are experiencing a lithium boom. New mines are opening rapidly to feed global battery demand. But we have documented serious labour rights violations in some of these operations, particularly those owned by foreign investors: excessive working hours without overtime pay, inadequate personal protective equipment, and discrimination against local workers, unsafe conditions and open hostility to union organising. As ZDAMWU, we have exposed these abuses publicly and we have supported our government's decision to suspend the export of raw lithium and other critical minerals as a step towards value addition and beneficiation on African soil.

But here is our warning: beneficiation without robust HRDD will simply move the abuse from the extraction site to the processing plant. Every new lithium refinery, battery component factory or mineral processing facility must be licensed with clear, enforceable HRDD obligations – including freedom of association, collective bargaining, safe and healthy work, living wages, gender equality and effective access to remedy – and unions must be at the table to monitor compliance.

So what does the new frontier for HRDD actually look like from our perspective?

First, it means tech companies, battery manufacturers and automakers that depend on African minerals must map and publicly disclose their suppliers. They must tell us which mines they source from, which communities are affected, and provide concrete evidence of direct engagement with unions and workers on the ground.

Second, HRDD processes must include regular, structured dialogue with African trade unions and affected communities – not occasional audits conducted by consultants who fly in and fly out. We need joint risk assessments, transparent grievance mechanisms, and verifiable remediation plans when violations occur.

Third, access to African critical minerals must be conditional. Regulators in the global North, African governments and institutions like this new Competence Center must ensure that mineral offtake agreements, investment permits and trade deals require demonstrable respect for workers' rights, community consent and the principles of the Africa Mining Vision.

Let me close with this: Africa's minerals are wiring the world's future. The smartphones in your pockets, the electric vehicles on European roads, and the renewable energy infrastructure being built across the global North – all of this depends on minerals extracted by African workers. The real new frontier for HRDD is not another framework

document or voluntary code. It is accountability that follows the mineral from the pit in Zimbabwe or the DRC to the factory in Germany, China or the United States. It is ensuring that no battery, no data center and no green technology is built on the broken bodies and silenced voices of African mine workers and communities.

That is the standard we must hold ourselves to if we are serious about justice in the technology and critical minerals value chains.

Thank you.

---