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An Ecumenical Response to Mining Injustice and Ecological Degradation in Shurugwi Mines, Zimbabwe

Aurtha Gumbo

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Email of the author: revagumbo@gmail.com

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Abstract

Mining in Shurugwi, Zimbabwe, has long been regarded as a pathway to economic growth; however, it has also resulted in significant environmental damage, social inequality, and health risks for local communities. Large-scale and artisanal mining practices, including heap leaching, the use of toxic chemicals, and river diversion, have caused soil degradation and left residents contending with blocked and contaminated water sources, deteriorating agricultural and grazing lands, declining biodiversity, and deteriorating infrastructure, including recreational and tourist sites. Health risks are also considerable, as residents face silicosis, respiratory diseases, and accidents associated with open pits. The situation is exacerbated by weak governance, insufficient enforcement by the Environmental Management Agency (EMA), and the silence of some traditional and church leaders, which increases the vulnerability of the community. Small-scale miners are frequently marginalised or intimidated, which limits the capacity of communities to defend their livelihoods and environment. This study examines the role of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) as an ecumenical body responding to these challenges. Drawing on biblical teachings such as Psalm 24:1 (“The earth is the Lord’s”) and Genesis 2:15 (“till and keep”), the ZCC advocates ethical mining, ecological responsibility, transparency, and community empowerment. The study emphasises prophetic leadership, public theology, and coordinated advocacy as means of transforming silence and inaction into action that promotes justice. The study recommends strengthening ecumenical collaboration, supporting community-led environmental monitoring, enforcing legal frameworks such as Section 73 of the Constitution, rehabilitating damaged land and rivers, and promoting education on ethical stewardship. The study concludes that Shurugwi represents a critical juncture for Zimbabwe and presents an opportunity to align mining practices with social, ecological, and moral obligations. By integrating theological reflection, participatory governance, and sustainable development principles, mining can become a life-affirming force that contributes to the restoration of the environment and community well-being.

Keywords: *Ecological Degradation, Ecumenical Response, Mining Hazards, Mining Injustice, Shurugwi.*

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1.0 Introduction

Mining in Shurugwi, Zimbabwe, has caused serious harm to local communities, despite the area's rich deposits of gold, chrome, and other minerals. Practices such as heap leaching, the use of toxic chemicals, the abandonment of pits, and river diversion have damaged farmland, grazing land, and water sources. These practices have also led to illnesses and accidents among mine workers and residents. Local infrastructure and tourist sites have been affected, while small-scale miners frequently face intimidation. The Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) has engaged broadly with issues of ethical mining and environmental stewardship through pastoral statements and participation in mining indabas; however, it has not directly addressed the challenges in Shurugwi. This article examines the environmental and social impacts of mining in Shurugwi and considers how ecumenical principles, as promoted by the ZCC, can guide communities towards justice, responsible stewardship, and sustainable management of Zimbabwe's mineral resources.

1.1 The Shurugwi Mining Context

Shurugwi is located along Zimbabwe's mineral-rich Great Dyke, which is known for its deposits of gold, chrome, nickel, and other minerals. Despite this mineral wealth, residents face serious environmental and social challenges arising from extensive mining activity. Large-scale and artisanal mining have both caused widespread land degradation, with the Environmental Management Agency (EMA) reporting that thousands of hectares in the region have been damaged by mining operations that are often poorly managed (Basera, 2020; EMA, 2025). Rivers and streams, including the Mutevekwu River, have been severely affected by pollution, siltation, and chemical contamination, rendering the water unsafe for domestic use, livestock watering, or irrigation (Newsday, 2024). Abandoned pits and trenches created by mining not only scar the landscape but also pose significant safety risks to children, livestock, and residents. Infrastructure such as roads, tourist attractions, and communal facilities has deteriorated under the strain of unchecked excavation (Southern Eye, 2024).

Mining in Shurugwi has also caused broader ecological harm. Chemicals such as mercury and cyanide, which are used in small-scale and heap leaching operations, have infiltrated soils and water sources, threatening biodiversity and public health (Zimbabwe Situation, 2021). The Environmental Management Agency has occasionally taken action, for example by issuing environmental protection orders and imposing fines for mining conducted without environmental impact assessments; however, enforcement has remained inconsistent and constrained by limited resources (Herald Online, 2021). National efforts to strengthen regulations, including the reinforcement of the polluter pays principle under Statutory Instrument 188 of 2024, seek to hold mining actors responsible for the rehabilitation of degraded land and water systems; nevertheless, challenges persist in translating policy into meaningful environmental recovery at the local level (New Ziana, 2025). The outcome is a context in which the natural richness of Shurugwi's land contrasts sharply with the lived experience of ecological loss and community hardship, which underscores the urgent need for ethical, accountable, and sustainable mining practices.

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite its mineral wealth, Shurugwi has not experienced meaningful economic development from mining. Instead, mining has caused significant environmental and social harm to local communities. Open pits, chemical contamination from heap leaching, and diverted rivers have destroyed farmland, grazing land, and water sources used for domestic purposes and irrigation (Southern Eye, 2025). Local infrastructure, including roads, tourist attractions, and community

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facilities such as Makusha Stadium, has deteriorated under the strain of unregulated mining. Health risks are also prevalent, as miners and residents are exposed to respiratory illnesses such as silicosis, which is incurable. Furthermore, abandoned pits have caused accidents and fatalities among children and livestock. Small-scale miners are often intimidated or excluded from decision-making, which limits the ability of the community to protect its environment or to benefit from the minerals beneath its land (ZELA, 2021). In a YouTube documentary titled *The Shurugwi Gold Curse – How The Chinese Are Plundering Shurugwi*, a resident describes the impact of mining, stating, “this mining has turned our hills and rivers into places of danger and ruin, not prosperity” (The FeedZW, 2024, 01:02), which illustrates the social and psychological toll of mining on local communities.

The governance and regulatory systems intended to protect the environment have often proven ineffective. The Environmental Management Agency (EMA) has attempted to enforce environmental standards and to require the rehabilitation of degraded land, but compliance remains inconsistent and enforcement mechanisms are weak (ZELA, 2021). Communities therefore face a situation in which the wealth beneath their feet brings ecological destruction, social insecurity, and few tangible benefits. This study examines the ecological and social impacts of mining in Shurugwi and explores how ecumenical principles, as advocated in broader mining discussions by the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, can inform ethical, responsible, and sustainable mining practices. The aim is to identify ways in which faith-based engagement and community advocacy can promote environmental stewardship, social justice, and shared benefit for the people living alongside Zimbabwe’s mineral wealth.

2.0 Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, contextual, and theological research design to examine the social, environmental, and ethical challenges caused by mining in Shurugwi. The design also enables an exploration of how ecumenical bodies can respond to these challenges and facilitates a deeper understanding of people’s lived experiences. Qualitative research focuses on meaning, narratives, and human experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 44). This approach creates space to listen attentively to community members and to understand how mining affects their land, water, health, and livelihoods. It also enables the researcher to explore how people interpret justice and responsibility in their daily lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018: 12).

This design is appropriate because mining is not merely an economic issue; it is also a social, environmental, and moral one. A contextual theological approach connects real-life experiences with Christian teaching on stewardship, justice, and care for creation (Bevans, 2002: 5). Contextual theology begins with the experiences of people and then reflects on these experiences in the light of faith. By bringing together qualitative inquiry and theological reflection, the study goes beyond describing events and explains why the situation in Shurugwi matters for human dignity, community well-being, and ecumenical responsibility. Previous research indicates that qualitative approaches are particularly useful in studying environmental justice and community-based issues because they capture local voices and social realities (Moon et al., 2016: 448). In this way, the research design enables the study to remain grounded in community experience while also engaging ethical and theological concerns in a meaningful and practical manner.

2.2 Data Sources

The study draws on multiple data sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the situation. Primary sources include pastoral letters and statements from the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), such as the letter issued on 16 October 2025, which articulates ethical concerns and principles regarding mining and environmental stewardship (ZCC, 2025). Secondary sources include environmental reports, particularly from the Environmental Management Agency (EMA, 2019), which provide evidence of land degradation, water pollution, and other ecological impacts. Legal and policy documents, including Section 73 of the Constitution of Zimbabwe, the Environmental Management Act, and the National Development Strategy 1 (2021–2025), were reviewed to provide a framework for understanding governance, regulation, and accountability in mining activities. Community narratives and reports from civil society organisations, such as the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Association (ZELA) and the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development (ZIMCODD), were also analysed to capture the perspectives, experiences, and concerns of residents, particularly regarding how mining has affected their livelihoods, safety, and environment.

2.3 Theological and Analytical Framework

The study is guided by a theological framework that integrates biblical principles, African eco-theology, and public theology. Key scriptures, including Psalm 24:1 (“The earth is the Lord’s”) and Genesis 2:15 (“till and keep”), form the foundation for understanding the moral responsibility to care for creation. These texts affirm that the earth belongs to God and that human beings are entrusted with its care. Biblical stewardship calls for responsible and life-giving use of natural resources rather than exploitation (Chitando & Taringa, 2016: 84). In the African worldview, land is closely linked to identity, survival, and spiritual meaning. *Ubuntu* (I am because we are) emphasises collective responsibility, care, and mutual support. Gunda (2017: 118) argues that environmental degradation affects the whole community and therefore requires shared moral responsibility.

This study applies public theology and the principles of ecumenical leadership to examine how faith-based organisations, particularly the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), can advocate for ethical mining practices, transparency, and accountability. Zimbabwean public theologians argue that the church has a prophetic duty to speak against injustice and to promote social and environmental well-being (Chitando, 2019: 8). Together, these theological perspectives allow the study to interpret mining not simply as an economic or environmental issue but as a moral and ethical concern. Mining affects human dignity, community life, and the integrity of creation. It therefore demands community engagement, responsible stewardship, and justice.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central throughout this study. Respect for communities, confidentiality, and careful handling of sensitive information were observed to avoid harm and to prevent misrepresentation of participants’ experiences. The study relied primarily on publicly available documents, pastoral letters, reports, and documented narratives from community members, which ensured transparency and accountability. Particular attention was paid to presenting the findings in an informative, responsible, and respectful manner that recognises the lived realities of those affected by mining. By bringing together people’s lived experiences, theological reflection, and policy analysis, this methodology offers a balanced and ethically grounded approach to examining mining and ecological degradation in Shurugwi. It

also creates space for reflection on how ecumenical engagement can promote justice and more sustainable management of natural resources.

3.0 Findings

3.1 Mining Injustice and Ecological Degradation in Shurugwi

Mining in Shurugwi has brought both wealth and devastation, creating a situation in which the promise of development is overshadowed by environmental, social, and health crises. The extraction of gold and other minerals through methods such as heap leaching has caused severe contamination of soil, rivers, and grazing lands. Chemicals such as cyanide and mercury, which are used to separate gold, have entered water bodies that local communities depend on for drinking, irrigation, and livestock, making the water unsafe and reducing agricultural productivity (Herald Online, 2020). Rivers have been blocked, diverted, or completely silted up, leaving communities without reliable sources of clean water, while the remaining water is often chemically polluted, causing direct harm to humans, animals, and aquatic life (ZELA, 2021; The FeedZW, 2024). Accumulated soil and mining waste have rendered the land unstable and unsafe, while open pits remain scattered across the area. Children and livestock have fallen into these pits, and in some cases lives have been lost. This situation has left the community living in fear and insecurity (Southern Eye, 2025).

The health impacts of mining in Shurugwi are severe. Miners often work without protective clothing or safety equipment and consequently inhale dust and fumes that cause respiratory illnesses, including silicosis, bronchitis, and other chronic lung conditions (Mining Index Zimbabwe, 2025; Southern Eye, 2024). Uncontrolled blasting occurs at irregular times, sometimes at night, and generates noise and dust while causing structural damage to nearby homes. Unsafe working conditions, combined with chemical exposure, heighten the risk of disease and injury (Herald Online, 2020).

Ecological degradation in Shurugwi is now also extensive. The heap leaching process and unregulated excavation have destroyed biodiversity, including plant species such as the flame lily, and have disrupted natural habitats. Land that once supported agriculture, grazing, and even tourism has been rendered unusable, with local landmarks such as the Boterekwa Gorge, Makusha Stadium, and the golf course now in ruins (Southern Eye, 2024). The collapse of these facilities not only affects livelihoods and recreation but also undermines the socio-economic potential of the district. Areas that once attracted tourists have lost their appeal, while infrastructure and public amenities have deteriorated under the combined effects of mining and neglect (NewZimbabwe, 2025).

Governance and accountability mechanisms in Shurugwi are weak, which further aggravates the crisis. The Environmental Management Agency (EMA) has investigated sites and issued directives for rehabilitation, but enforcement is often inconsistent, while illegal or unregulated operations continue with limited consequences (ZELA, 2021). Chiefs and other local leaders have remained largely silent, while small-scale miners report harassment and exclusion from decision-making processes, which leaves communities without a strong voice to challenge destructive practices (Mining Index Zimbabwe, 2025). Even where policies exist to hold polluters accountable, such as Section 73 of the Constitution and the Environmental Management Act, their implementation has been slow or absent, allowing environmental destruction to continue unchecked.

Although Shurugwi is rich in minerals, it suffers from poor infrastructure, health risks, ecological damage, and social vulnerability. Communities face pollution, unsafe working

conditions, loss of arable land, ruined tourism and recreational facilities, and threats to life and property, while the wealth extracted from their land largely benefits outsiders or a few powerful individuals (Southern Eye, 2024). The combination of environmental harm, health dangers, governance shortcomings, and socio-economic exclusion makes Shurugwi a stark example of mining injustice and emphasises the urgent need for ethical stewardship, community advocacy, and a prophetic ecumenical response to these hazards.

3.2 Legal and Policy Context for Mining and Environmental Protection

Mining activities in Zimbabwe operate within a comprehensive legal and policy framework designed to balance economic development with environmental protection and human well-being. The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013) provides a critical foundation for this balance. Section 73 guarantees every person the right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being and empowers citizens to ensure that the environment is protected for present and future generations through reasonable legislative and other measures (Republic of Zimbabwe, 2013: 22). This constitutional provision transforms environmental protection from a policy preference into a justiciable right. For communities affected by mining, such as those in Shurugwi, polluted rivers, degraded grazing land, and unsafe living conditions are not merely unfortunate consequences of development; they constitute potential violations of constitutional rights. Churches and civil society actors, including ecumenical bodies, rely on Section 73 both as a legal anchor and as a moral platform to advocate for ecological justice (Gunda, 2015: 44).

Supplementing the Constitution is the Environmental Management Act (EMA) of 2002, which establishes the Environmental Management Agency and obliges all individuals and corporate entities to prevent pollution and environmental degradation. Section 97 empowers the Agency to conduct inspections, issue compliance orders, impose penalties, and require remediation where environmental harm has occurred (EMA Act, 2002: 35). In addition, Statutory Instrument 7 of 2007 requires environmental impact assessments (EIAs), regular audits, and rehabilitation plans for mining activities (SI 7, 2007: 3). These instruments recognise that mining, by its very nature, disrupts land, water systems, and biodiversity, and therefore requires structured oversight and post-mining restoration.

However, the experience of Shurugwi reveals a significant gap between law and implementation. Despite progressive constitutional and statutory protections, enforcement remains inconsistent and often reactive. Open pits, silted rivers, unsafe blasting, and chemical contamination indicate that regulatory compliance is uneven (Spiegel, 2017: 221; EMA, 2020: 18). Communities frequently lack access to information on environmental impact assessments or on company rehabilitation plans, which limits their ability to demand accountability. As a result, residents bear the environmental and social costs of mining while having little influence over regulatory processes.

Zimbabwe's development blueprint, Vision 2030, positions mining as a key driver of economic growth (Republic of Zimbabwe, 2018: 6). While this policy direction underscores the economic importance of the sector, it also calls for sustainable and responsible resource use. It is within this tension between exploitative extraction and accountable, life-affirming development that ecumenical bodies, particularly the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), play a critical role. The ZCC complements statutory institutions by translating legal rights into moral language, empowering communities to claim their constitutional protections, and advocating for environmental stewardship.

The ZCC uses pastoral letters and public forums to bridge the gap between the law and the lived realities of mining communities (ZCC, 2023: 12). These faith-based platforms provide a safe space for residents to discuss how mining activities affect their ancestral lands (Machingura, 2020: 85). By educating communities about Section 73 of the Constitution, churches become important centres of legal literacy (ZELA, 2022: 45). This education helps community members understand their right to a clean environment that is not harmful to their health. It also ensures that environmental regulations move beyond legal texts and into the daily lives and moral values of residents (Chitando, 2022: 18). In Shurugwi, where mining often leads to land degradation, the church acts as a mediator between marginalised villagers and powerful corporate interests (Taringa & Museka, 2021: 104). Although Zimbabwe possesses a strong legal framework, its effectiveness relies heavily on transparency and active local participation (ZELA, 2023: 11). Faith-based leadership is essential for translating these laws into restorative justice for affected families (Manyonganise, 2022: 54).

3.3 The Ecumenical Response to Mining

The ZCC, as one of the principal ecumenical bodies in the country, emphasises that Zimbabwe's mineral resources are a sacred trust meant to benefit communities and serve the common good, rather than to be exploited for private gain. In this view, mining should be guided by the principle of stewardship rather than unchecked exploitation. Biblical teachings, such as Psalm 24:1, which declares "The earth is the Lord's," and Genesis 2:15, which instructs humans to "till and keep" the land, form the foundation for this perspective. These scriptures provide both moral and practical guidance, affirming that communities, leaders, and companies have a responsibility to protect the environment, safeguard natural resources, and ensure that development respects God's creation. In Shurugwi, where mining has created serious ecological hazards, the ZCC frames these ethical principles as urgent imperatives, calling for mining to be conducted in ways that heal rather than harm the land and its people (ZCC, 2025).

The ZCC also highlights justice and human rights as core components of ethical mining. Communities in Shurugwi, particularly marginalised groups and small-scale miners, have suffered from unsafe working conditions, chemical pollution, and exclusion from decision-making processes (The FeedZW, 2024). The Council insists that these communities must be protected and empowered, in line with the constitutional right to a clean environment under Section 73 of Zimbabwe's Constitution. Ethical mining, therefore, is not only about environmental care but also about ensuring that economic activities respect human dignity, promote social equity, and provide tangible benefits for local populations. By linking environmental stewardship to social justice, the ZCC promotes a holistic approach in which human, ecological, and spiritual well-being are inseparable (ZCC, 2025).

Accountability and governance form another critical dimension of the ZCC's response. As an ecumenical body, the Council advocates for transparency in mining contracts, responsible management of mineral revenue, and the elimination of illicit financial flows that divert wealth away from communities. Through initiatives such as the Alternative Mining Indaba and partnerships with civil society organisations, the ZCC works to hold both mining companies and government authorities accountable for ethical and sustainable practices. This approach reflects the Council's commitment to ecumenical leadership, demonstrating that faith-based organisations can provide moral guidance, advocacy, and oversight to complement state regulatory efforts. In Shurugwi, where EMA enforcement has often been weak and small-scale miners face intimidation, the ZCC's engagement represents a necessary collective voice calling

for fairness, responsibility, and community-centred decision-making (ZCC, 2025; The FeedZW, 2024).

The ZCC identifies the present moment as a crucial opportunity for transformative action in Zimbabwe's mining sector. This period calls for coordinated, collective advocacy that moves beyond isolated complaints or individual action. It is also an opportunity to rethink mining as a vehicle for sustainable and inclusive development, rather than a source of environmental destruction and social inequality (Southern Eye, 2024). The ZCC's pastoral guidance emphasises that communities, government bodies, civil society, and faith-based organisations must act together to ensure that mineral wealth contributes to the common good. In Shurugwi, this means using the current awareness of ecological and social harms as a turning point to implement ethical practices, restore damaged land, protect vulnerable populations, and ensure that future mining aligns with principles of justice, stewardship, and shared prosperity (ZCC, 2025).

3.4 Ecumenical Collaboration and Multi-Level Advocacy on Mining

Complementing the work of the ZCC, ecumenical engagement with mining in Zimbabwe, including that of the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ). This increasingly aligns with global sustainable development priorities, particularly those relating to clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16). The EFZ has addressed mining impacts with particular concern for how environmental degradation disrupts household well-being, family cohesion, and community stability. In rural mining contexts, where water contamination and land degradation undermine subsistence agriculture, the EFZ's emphasis on pastoral accompaniment and ethical stewardship reflects an integrated understanding of development that links spiritual care with socio-economic justice (EFZ, 2022). Although its engagement may be less institutionalised than that of formal ecumenical councils, EFZ member churches frequently operate at the grassroots level, promoting sustainable livelihoods, environmental awareness, and accountability in local governance processes. In this sense, the ministry of the EFZ contributes indirectly to development frameworks that prioritise poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, and inclusive institutions.

The Zimbabwe Heads of Christian Denominations (ZHOCD) has emerged as an important collective voice in national discourse, offering a moral platform through which church leaders address pressing issues such as mining-related displacement, water pollution, corruption, and socio-economic exclusion. By issuing joint communiqués and engaging with government officials, the ZHOCD affirms the principle that economic development must respect both human dignity and ecological integrity (Gumbo, 2021:12). Its advocacy reflects broader development priorities that emphasise justice, participatory governance, and the protection of vulnerable groups. Through initiatives in church-based education and public theology, the ZHOCD encourages congregations to move beyond spiritual consolation toward active citizenship, legal literacy, and environmental responsibility. In this way, the ZHOCD strengthens community agency and contributes to international aspirations for inclusive institutions and equitable growth.

At the continental level, the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) situates extractive industry concerns within broader African priorities of economic justice, ecological sustainability, and accountable governance. The AACC has consistently argued that Africa's mineral wealth must serve the common good rather than perpetuate inequality, elite capture, or

environmental destruction (AACC, 2019). Its programmes on economic justice and sustainable development call on member churches to engage public policy, monitor corporate responsibility, and defend communities affected by extractive activities. By framing natural resources as God-given gifts entrusted to humanity, the AACC integrates theological stewardship with development objectives that promote environmental protection, fair economic participation, and community empowerment across the continent.

At the global level, the World Council of Churches (WCC) reinforces this discourse by linking mining injustice to systemic economic inequalities and ecological crises. Through its work on ecological justice, climate responsibility, and corporate accountability, the WCC emphasises that unsustainable extraction undermines both creation and human rights (WCC, 2018). The WCC encourages churches worldwide to advocate for transparent resource contracts, environmental rehabilitation, and policies that prioritise life over profit. Its theological reflections affirm that creation care is inseparable from justice for marginalised communities, echoing global development commitments that seek to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability and institutional accountability.

Taken together, the EFZ, ZHOCD, AACC, and WCC demonstrate that ecumenical engagement with mining extends beyond pastoral concern into the realm of structural transformation. Their interventions align closely with global sustainable development commitments by promoting clean water, just economic participation, responsible production, climate resilience, and accountable governance. In contexts such as Shurugwi, where mining intersects with ecological vulnerability and socio-economic marginalisation, these ecumenical bodies provide both moral legitimacy and practical frameworks for advocating for resource governance that serves life, protects creation, and advances the common good.

3.5 African Theology and Ubuntu as Ecological Ethics

African theological thought provides a strong foundation for ethical engagement with environmental challenges, particularly through the lens of ubuntu, which emphasises interconnectedness, communal responsibility, and the intrinsic value of all life. Ubuntu, often expressed as “I am because we are,” situates human well-being within the broader context of community and ecological integrity, asserting that human flourishing cannot occur at the expense of others or of the environment (Mbiti, 1969). In the context of Shurugwi, where rivers, grazing lands, and agricultural plots are shared among households, the principles of ubuntu offer a robust moral and practical framework for addressing the social and ecological harms caused by mining. This philosophy challenges individualistic approaches that prioritise personal gain or external corporate interests over communal welfare and environmental health, and it calls for decisions that take into account the long-term impact on both people and the natural world.

For ecumenical bodies such as the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), the application of ubuntu can move beyond abstract principles to tangible action. By facilitating community-led environmental monitoring, local congregations can help residents to identify and document ecological degradation caused by mining, such as soil contamination, river diversion, and destruction of flora and fauna. Ubuntu also encourages the mobilisation of local resources for ecological restoration, whether through tree planting, river clean-up campaigns, or the rehabilitation of abandoned mining pits, thereby fostering a sense of shared responsibility for the land. Moreover, ubuntu strengthens community cohesion and advocacy, enabling residents to collectively engage mining companies, government agencies, and regulators, rather than confronting these challenges in isolation.

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African theological ethics, grounded in ubuntu, further complements scriptural teachings such as Genesis 2:15, which commands humans to “till and keep” the land. Together, these theological and philosophical frameworks emphasise that stewardship is both moral and communal, requiring ethical decision-making that safeguards environmental integrity while promoting human dignity. In Shurugwi, where mining has disrupted ecosystems, contaminated water sources, and undermined local livelihoods, ubuntu provides a culturally resonant and morally compelling lens through which ecumenical actors can advocate for restorative justice, sustainable resource management, and inclusive development that benefits the entire community rather than a privileged few. By embedding ubuntu in environmental engagement, churches become not merely observers or advisors but active participants in fostering ecological resilience, social justice, and the long-term well-being of both people and creation.

3.6 Breaking the Silence: Towards Prophetic Leadership

In Shurugwi, one of the most pressing challenges facing communities affected by mining is the silence of traditional leaders and some local church bodies. Chiefs, who hold authority and are expected to protect the welfare of their people, often remain silent owing to fear, political pressure, or relationships with powerful mining companies. Similarly, while the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) provides national guidance on ethical mining and environmental stewardship, its direct engagement with specific local crises, such as the environmental and social harm in Shurugwi, has historically been limited. This silence allows destructive practices to continue unchecked, leaving residents vulnerable to health hazards, ecological damage, and social marginalisation (Southern Eye, 2024; ZELA, 2021). The dynamics of power and elite capture in the mining sector amplify this problem, as influential actors often prioritise profit over the rights and well-being of ordinary community members, thereby further marginalising voices that seek justice.

Addressing this silence requires prophetic leadership, understood as morally grounded courage that challenges injustice even when doing so entails risk. The ZCC, as a unifying ecumenical body, provides a model for such leadership by advocating for transparency, ethical mining, and community accountability. Through public theology, faith institutions empower local communities by providing knowledge, moral guidance, and a collective voice capable of influencing decision-making processes. This approach emphasises that effective action must be collective rather than individual, as isolated complaints rarely hold powerful institutions accountable. United advocacy, supported by church-led moral authority, can protect communities, ensure equitable participation, and challenge exploitative practices while reinforcing social cohesion (ZCC, 2025; The FeedZW, 2024).

Prophetic leadership in Shurugwi also links theology directly to practical action. Biblical teachings, including the call to stewardship in Psalm 24:1 and Genesis 2:15 are interpreted not only as spiritual guidance but also as a mandate for restorative ecological justice. Communities, churches, and civil society actors can work together to rehabilitate degraded land, protect water sources, and ensure that mining benefits rather than harms local populations. By combining ecumenical leadership, public theology, and grassroots advocacy, residents gain both the moral and practical tools to claim their rights, safeguard their environment, and promote sustainable development (Southern Eye, 2024).

Ultimately, prophetic leadership involves transforming fear, power imbalances, and institutional passivity into informed, coordinated advocacy, in which the church functions as a moral conscience and communities become active agents of their own protection. In Shurugwi, this approach demonstrates how faith-based leadership, combined with community

engagement, can address mining injustice, restore environmental integrity, and advance social justice. It provides a pathway for ethical and sustainable development, showing that meaningful change is possible when moral vision is paired with collective action (ZELA, 2021; ZCC, 2025).

3.7 Lessons from Other Mines in Zimbabwe

Mining experiences in other regions of Zimbabwe offer valuable lessons for understanding the challenges in Shurugwi and for designing appropriate responses. For instance, the Unki Mine in the Midlands Province demonstrates how foreign-owned operations can benefit local communities when there is effective engagement, clear agreements, and structured corporate social responsibility initiatives. Unki's model shows that transparent communication with residents, environmental monitoring, and investments in local infrastructure such as schools, clinics, and roads can significantly reduce conflict and promote sustainable development (ZELA, 2021; Southern Eye, 2024). However, it also reveals the dangers of over-reliance on corporate goodwill, as communities may remain vulnerable when companies prioritise profit over environmental protection or when regulatory enforcement is weak.

The Zimasco operations in Kwekwe District provide another important lesson. Historically, Zimasco maintained infrastructure and supported community projects, demonstrating that mining wealth can contribute to local development. However, inadequate environmental rehabilitation and the long-term effects of chemical pollution have left lasting ecological damage, particularly in agricultural lands and water systems (EMA, 2019; Mining Index Zimbabwe, 2025). This highlights the importance of strong legal frameworks, regular monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms to ensure that mining companies comply with environmental and social obligations, regardless of their past contributions to the community.

Artisanal and small-scale mines across Zimbabwe illustrate the risks of unregulated operations. In areas such as Chimanmani and Zvishavane, informal mining has led to open pits, unsafe labour, chemical exposure, and community conflicts over resource use. Lessons from these sites highlight the need for community organisation, participatory governance, and capacity-building so that residents can monitor mining activities, demand accountability, and advocate for safe and equitable practices (ZELA, 2021; The FeedZW, 2024). Collectively, these cases underline the importance of combining legal enforcement, community empowerment, ethical corporate practices, and ecumenical leadership to achieve sustainable mining outcomes. For Shurugwi, the experiences of other mines demonstrate that mineral wealth can be either a blessing or a curse, depending on governance, ecological responsibility, and the active participation of affected communities and moral authorities like the ZCC.

4.0 Conclusion

Despite the rich mineral resources of Shurugwi, mining in the district has led to environmental damage, health risks, and social injustice and has exposed governance weaknesses within Zimbabwe's extractive sector. Communities face polluted rivers, degraded land, unsafe working conditions, and limited protection, while mineral wealth has not improved local livelihoods. The situation calls for mining to be reimagined as a responsible and sustainable practice rooted in stewardship and human dignity. Ecumenical leadership, represented in this case by the ZCC, must move towards prophetic advocacy that promotes accountability, environmental restoration, and community empowerment so that mineral resources become a source of justice and sustainable development rather than harm.

5.0 Recommendations

Addressing the challenges of mining injustice and ecological degradation in Shurugwi requires a multifaceted approach that integrates ecumenical leadership, community empowerment, legal accountability, and sustainable environmental management. First, there is a need to strengthen ecumenical collaboration and advocacy platforms. The ZCC, as one of the leading ecumenical bodies in the country, is uniquely positioned to coordinate faith-based advocacy, uniting churches across denominations to amplify the concerns of affected communities. Drawing on pastoral guidance, such as the ZCC letter of 16 October 2025, the Council can lead public theological interventions that remind all stakeholders of the moral and spiritual responsibility to treat mineral resources as a sacred trust, emphasising ethical stewardship over exploitation (ZCC, 2025). Strengthening these platforms would enable churches to support community campaigns, engage with policymakers, and challenge harmful mining practices effectively (ZCC, 25 February 2026).

Second, communities must be empowered through environmental monitoring and legal literacy. Residents of Shurugwi should be trained and supported to monitor the impact of mining on soil, water, and biodiversity, using evidence-based data to hold mining companies accountable. This approach should be complemented by education on legal frameworks, including Section 73 of the Constitution, the Environmental Management Act, and statutory instruments such as EMA SI 188 of 2024, which establish the right to a clean and safe environment and require polluters to remediate environmental damage (EMA, 2019; ZELA, 2021). Knowledge of these legal provisions would enable communities to engage confidently with regulatory authorities, advocate for the enforcement of rehabilitation measures, and participate in decision-making processes regarding existing and future mining operations.

Third, support must be extended to residents' associations and participatory governance structures. The formation of local community associations has already proven effective in giving residents a collective voice in negotiations with mining companies and local authorities. Encouraging and institutionalising these associations can ensure consistent engagement, facilitate dialogue with government officials, including the Provincial Affairs Minister, the Mines Minister, and other relevant ministries, and strengthen demands for transparency regarding agreements between the government and mining operators, such as Unki, Zimasco, and foreign investors (Southern Eye, 2024; The FeedZW, 2024). These associations should also be involved in tracking compliance with environmental and social obligations outlined in mining agreements, ensuring that mineral wealth benefits the community rather than a few external actors.

Fourth, there must be a coordinated effort to rehabilitate degraded land, rivers, and biodiversity. Mining activities, particularly heap leaching and open-pit excavation, have left soils contaminated, rivers blocked, and ecological habitats destroyed, including important botanical sites such as the flame lily gardens (Southern Eye, 2024). Rehabilitation efforts should include reforestation, river restoration, and the removal of toxic chemicals from soils and water, as well as the redesign of landscapes to prevent accidents and restore grazing and agricultural land. EMA reports and mandates provide a clear framework for enforcing such remediation, requiring that mining companies bear the costs of environmental restoration (EMA, 2019). Partnerships between government, civil society, and ecumenical actors can help implement these measures effectively.

Fifth, there is a critical need for education on ethical stewardship and public theology in mining contexts. Integrating ecological ethics and public theology into community awareness

programmes can help residents understand their moral and legal rights, the spiritual dimensions of stewardship, and the broader implications of mining for justice and human dignity (ZCC, 2025). Churches, local schools, and civil society organisations can collaborate to promote an ethic of care for creation, highlight the consequences of exploitation, and encourage participation in decision-making processes that align with sustainable and just development principles. By linking theological reflection, legal knowledge, and practical advocacy, communities in Shurugwi can move toward collective action that ensures mining contributes positively to social, environmental, and economic well-being.

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