



Community participation and accountability: pathways to ethical security governance in Zimbabwe's Marange diamond fields

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Abstract

This study examined the accessibility and effectiveness of grievance mechanisms in Marange. It analysed the barriers that prevent abuse reporting and identified community-driven accountability strategies. A qualitative case study design was employed, drawing on a target population of 846 individuals. Ninety participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling, comprising 60 community members, 20 private security guards, 4 state security officials, and 6 headmen. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Findings showed that existing grievance mechanisms are largely inaccessible and ineffective, and that fear of retaliation and institutional bias discourage reporting. Communities demanded genuine inclusion in security governance. The study recommends establishing independent complaint mechanisms, creating community-security dialogue forums, and formalising community oversight committees.

Keywords: *community participation; accountability; security governance; grievance mechanisms; Marange; Zimbabwe*

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Introduction

Security-community relations in extractive zones are characterised by mistrust (Enns et al., 2020). This mistrust stems from decades of abuse and exploitation. Communities see security forces as protectors of corporate interests rather than of people, while security forces view communities as threats to production and profit. Enns et al. (2020) describe this arrangement as hybrid security

governance. Public and private security actors work together to protect extractive infrastructure. Local residents, however, are rarely consulted about how that protection is delivered. This mutual hostility creates a volatile environment that is prone to violence. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (United Nations, 2011) promote corporate accountability through three pillars: protect, respect, and remedy. States have a duty to protect human rights from corporate abuse. Corporations have a responsibility to respect human

rights in their operations. Victims must have access to effective remedy for abuses suffered. Implementation remains weak due to elite interests (Wolfsteller and Li, 2022). Wolfsteller and Li (2022) argue that voluntary corporate self-regulation rarely produces transparent, binding obligations. Victims of corporate abuse are seldom central to the design of remedy mechanisms. Powerful actors benefit from the current system of impunity and resist changes that would limit their control over resources. Existing frameworks fail to address militarised impunity (Berg and Gabi, 2015). Berg and Gabi (2015) show that private security regulation in Southern Africa functions largely as a business licensing exercise. It is not yet a system of public accountability. Victims of security-related violence are left with few avenues for redress. Private security companies operate with minimal oversight or accountability, and state security forces are immune from prosecution in many countries. The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative focuses on revenue transparency but does not adequately address human rights or security-sector abuses. Civil society calls for contract disclosure and independent audits. Beneficial ownership disclosure would reveal who profits from mining, while independent audits would verify whether communities receive their fair share. Community consent should be required before any mining project begins, yet these reforms remain largely unimplemented in most countries. The gap between global standards and practice remains enormous.

Africa's extractive industries operate with limited community participation. The African Mining Vision (African Union, 2016) emphasises

transparency and was adopted to transform Africa's extractive sector. It calls for community benefit-sharing and human rights protections, yet implementation remains weak across the continent (Hilson and Ovidia, 2020). Hilson and Ovidia (2020) note that domesticating the Vision requires more than new policy documents. It requires a fundamental shift in how mining multinationals relate to host economies, a shift that has been slow to materialise. Most African countries have not domesticated the Mining Vision into law, and where laws exist, enforcement is virtually absent. Mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo proceeds without free, prior, and informed consent (Amnesty International, 2023). Free, prior, and informed consent is a recognised right under international law, yet mining companies routinely ignore this right without consequence. Communities are informed only after decisions have already been made, and their objections are dismissed or ignored entirely. Mozambican communities are similarly excluded from decision-making (Symons, 2016). Symons (2016) documents how a gas project in Cabo Delgado resettled over 1,500 people. This proceeded alongside a legal challenge over land rights and consultation. Gas and ruby extraction has proceeded without local consultation, and community members have learned about projects from the news rather than from companies. Traditional leaders were bypassed in negotiation processes, and this exclusion has documented links to conflict (Symons, 2016). Civil society organisations that raised these concerns found something paradoxical. Invoking the language of rights and participation legitimised the

same extractive logic they sought to challenge. When communities are excluded, they resort to protest and resistance, which is then met with state violence, repeating a cycle of exclusion, protest, and repression. Across Africa, grievance mechanisms exist on paper but not in practice. Company complaint hotlines often ring unanswered, and community liaison officers are rarely seen in affected villages. When complaints are filed, they disappear into bureaucratic black holes, and retaliation against complainants is common and well documented. This continental pattern reflects a systemic failure of governance.

Accountability gaps are equally evident at the regional level within the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The SADC Tribunal was dismantled in 2012, after it had ruled against Zimbabwe in the Mike Campbell land case (Nathan, 2013). Nathan (2013) describes the Tribunal's suspension as a cautionary tale. It shows how quickly a young regional court can be dismantled once it rules against a powerful member state. The ruling had favoured white commercial farmers over the Zimbabwean government. In response, SADC leaders stripped the Tribunal of its powers, and no regional court can now hear cases brought by individuals or non-governmental organisations. This has created a major accountability vacuum in Southern Africa. SADC's reliance on the principle of non-interference limits regional human rights action (Nathan, 2012). Nathan (2012) argues that a regional organisation's capacity for collective action is constrained by the orientation of its member states. SADC states have generally chosen sovereignty over accountability.

Human rights violations are treated as internal matters. Regional bodies cannot address them even in severe cases of abuse. South Africa's Marikana Commission recommendations remain unimplemented (Alexander, 2016). Alexander (2016) shows that the Commission's own report identified a decision by senior police officers as the decisive cause of the deaths. Yet the report stopped short of recommending that any individual officer face prosecution. The Commission recommended accountability for police who killed 34 miners. Yet no officer has been prosecuted for the Marikana massacre, and the victims' families continue to wait for justice a decade later. Zambia rarely prosecutes mining complaints (Siachitema, 2018). Siachitema (2018) attributes this to chronic underfunding of regulatory bodies and to the inability of poor complainants to access legal aid. Community complaints against mining companies disappear without action, and police often side with mining companies against local residents. Courts remain expensive and inaccessible for poor rural communities. Global Witness (2023) found that 62 environmental defenders were killed with no accountability between 2018 and 2022 across the SADC region. Perpetrators were almost never identified or prosecuted. Witnesses feared testifying because they too became targets. The SADC Protocol on Politics, Defence and Security Cooperation exists but has no enforcement mechanism for human rights provisions. Regional human rights courts have been proposed but never established, and the SADC Secretariat lacks the capacity to monitor extractive industry abuses. This regional pattern reflects a collective failure of

accountability systems.

Zimbabwe's Marange diamond fields exemplify this failure of grievance mechanisms. Few abuse cases have been prosecuted (CNRG, 2022; ZELA, 2023), and victims rarely report abuses to the police. When they do report, police often refuse to open cases, and sometimes arrest the victim instead of the perpetrator. The Community Share Ownership Trust failed due to mismanagement (ZELA, 2022; CNRG, 2022). The trust was meant to channel mining revenues to communities, but funds were instead diverted to politically connected elites. No meaningful development reached the affected communities, and the trust was eventually abandoned without accountability. Civil society continues to lobby for the Mines and Minerals Amendment Bill (ZELA, 2023). The bill includes provisions for community participation and benefit-sharing, and would require mining companies to obtain community consent. The bill has been pending before Parliament for several years, and mining industry lobbyists have blocked its passage. Community members remain excluded from decision-making (Kubatana, 2024), and security forces operate without civilian oversight in Marange; no independent body investigates complaints against security personnel. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission has visited Marange but taken no action, and its recommendations are not binding on the government. The National Peace and Reconciliation Commission lacks the capacity or mandate to investigate security force abuses. Traditional leaders have been sidelined from security governance, and their authority has been

systematically undermined by the state. This study examines grievance mechanisms and community participation in Marange in response to these gaps.

The Marange diamond fields cover approximately 3,000 hectares in Manicaland province. The area is home to an estimated 30,000 rural residents, predominantly Shona-speaking subsistence farmers. Traditional leadership structures include one chief and five headmen, who historically managed land allocation and dispute resolution. The specific problem addressed in this study is the complete absence of effective grievance mechanisms. Community members have no safe way to report security abuses. Those who report face retaliation, including night visits and threats. Security personnel appear to face little risk of prosecution, and internal company grievance procedures remain opaque and largely ineffective. Traditional leaders have been excluded from security governance, while state institutions lack the capacity or political will to act. The impact of these failures includes a pervasive culture of silence and fear. Victims suffer in silence because reporting is futile, and abuses continue because perpetrators face no consequences. Trust in local institutions appears to have eroded substantially, and many community members described losing faith in traditional leaders and government. Social cohesion has collapsed as neighbours mistrust one another. Young people see no future within the system and may turn to crime as a result.

Previous efforts to address these failures have largely collapsed. The Community Share Ownership Trust was intended to give communities a voice in mining governance but was captured by

political elites and failed completely. Police internal disciplinary systems are never activated against offending officers, and the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission has no enforcement powers. Civil society organisations have documented these abuses for years without meaningful change. International advocacy has produced no tangible improvements on the ground, and the government has rejected all calls for independent investigations. Addressing these gaps requires independent complaint mechanisms with retaliation protection, so that community members can report abuses without fear. Community-security dialogue forums should be established at village level, and community oversight committees need the authority to monitor security operations. Transparency measures must include public incident reporting, and annual human rights training should be mandatory for all security personnel. Formalisation of artisanal mining would reduce criminalisation and conflict, and prosecution of offenders must occur regardless of rank or political connection. This study provides empirical evidence to support these necessary reforms.

Unlike previous studies that assumed grievance mechanisms exist without testing their function, this study tests that assumption directly. It documents empirically that existing mechanisms in Marange, as described by participants, function largely symbolically and appear largely ineffective in practice. The study centres community perspectives on accountability failures, prioritising how affected communities experience justice systems rather than focusing only on institutional design. It applies Conflict Theory to explain why mechanisms fail.

Elite interests actively block accountability in Marange, because impunity serves those who control diamond revenues. The study documents retaliatory violence against complainants, including night visits and threats, a phenomenon rarely captured in official statistics or reports. It also shows how traditional authority has been systematically undermined. Chiefs and headmen, historically respected as dispute resolvers, appear to have lost much of their practical authority to state and corporate interests. Finally, the study identifies specific pathways for reform based directly on community input. This gives the resulting recommendations a legitimacy and practical relevance that top-down prescriptions often lack.

Statement of the problem

Formal grievance mechanisms exist, yet human rights violations continue unabated. Community members rarely report abuses due to fear and a perceived sense of futility. Security personnel operate with impunity, and internal systems remain opaque. Traditional authorities have been weakened and excluded from governance, while state institutions lack the capacity or political will to enforce accountability. Meaningful community participation in security policymaking remains largely absent. This combination of formal availability and practical inaccessibility is precisely what makes Marange a useful case for study. A setting with no grievance mechanisms at all would confirm what is already widely assumed. A setting where mechanisms exist but fail in practice reveals more about how impunity is actually produced and sustained.

Research objectives

The study pursued three objectives:

1. To examine the accessibility, functionality, and effectiveness of existing grievance mechanisms available to Marange community members.
2. To analyse the barriers that prevent community members from reporting human rights abuses and seeking redress.
3. To identify and propose community-driven strategies for enhancing participation in security governance and accountability systems.

Literature review

Accessibility, functionality, and effectiveness of grievance mechanisms

Grievance mechanisms include state institutions and corporate procedures, and both are often rendered ineffective by fear and bias (ZELA, 2023; CNRG, 2022). The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (United Nations, 2011) set out seven criteria for grievance mechanisms. These are legitimacy, accessibility, predictability, equity, transparency, rights-compatibility, and ongoing engagement. Legitimacy means that communities trust the mechanism to be fair. Accessibility means that all community members can use it. Predictability means that timelines for investigation and resolution are clear. Equity means that no group of complainants faces discrimination. Transparency means that complainants know the status of their case. Rights-compatibility means that outcomes align with human rights standards. Engagement means that dialogue between

communities and institutions remains ongoing. Implementation is weak wherever state and corporate interests align (Wolfsteller and Li, 2022). Drawing on a wide range of country case studies, Wolfsteller and Li (2022) find that state-based, non-judicial grievance mechanisms are hindered by narrow legal mandates. Weak complaint-handling powers over corporate actors compound the problem. National human rights institutions across the region illustrate this pattern. In Zimbabwe, the Human Rights Commission and the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission both lack capacity (ZHRC, 2022; Nyathi, 2019). Nyathi (2019) traces this weakness to chronic underfunding, a politicised appointment process, and an absence of district-level offices. All of this leaves the Commission largely inaccessible to rural communities such as those in Marange. Traditional leaders have been excluded from security governance, and internal company procedures remain opaque and are never made public. No independent body investigates complaints against security personnel.

Barriers preventing reporting and redress

Multiple barriers prevent community members from reporting abuses. Fear of retaliation is the most significant barrier documented. Victims who report face night visits and threats from soldiers, and family members of complainants are also targeted for intimidation. Lack of trust in institutions means that victims expect no justice. Police have refused to open cases in the past, and courts remain expensive and inaccessible for poor communities. Bureaucratic requirements demand official reports that victims cannot obtain, and without identification documents, police will not accept

complaints. The powerlessness of traditional leaders means that chiefs cannot help, because their words carry no authority with security forces. Opaque procedures mean that complainants never learn investigation outcomes, and cases disappear into bureaucratic black holes without resolution. No protection mechanisms exist for whistleblowers or witnesses, so retaliation frequently goes unpunished, and protection remains largely absent. These barriers have been documented across multiple extractive zones (Enns et al., 2020). Enns et al. (2020) find that communities near extractive sites define security narrowly, in terms set by companies and states. Their own, broader concerns about livelihood and safety often go unaddressed. This gap between official and lived definitions of security helps explain why formal reporting channels struggle to gain community trust.

Community-driven strategies for participation and accountability

Communities have proposed several strategies for participation and accountability. Independent complaint mechanisms must be confidential and free from retaliation, and should be located outside mining company control. Community-security dialogue forums should operate at village level, since regular meetings would build trust and resolve conflicts early. Regular, face-to-face interaction of this kind is central to what Putnam (2000) calls social capital. Social capital refers to the networks of trust and reciprocity that allow communities to act collectively. Putnam (2000) warns that such capital erodes when institutions stop bringing people together, which is consistent with the breakdown of trust documented in Marange.

Community oversight committees need the authority to monitor security operations and should include traditional leaders and church elders. Transparency measures require public incident reporting so that communities know how many complaints were filed and resolved. Training and accountability require clear consequences for violations, and annual human rights training should be mandatory for all personnel. Formalisation of artisanal and small-scale mining would reduce criminalisation and conflict, as legal recognition would replace violent enforcement with regulation. Psychosocial and legal aid for victims is also essential (IIED, 2020b). In Mozambique, community paralegals have worked alongside a local non-governmental organisation to support rural residents (IIED, 2020b). They help residents use land and consultation laws that would otherwise be inaccessible to them because of legal illiteracy. A similar model of trained, community-based paralegals could plausibly extend legal support to Marange, where formal courts remain distant and expensive. Meaningful reform ultimately requires political will (Nathan, 2012), since even well-designed mechanisms depend on the willingness of state and traditional authorities to enforce them.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on Conflict Theory (Marx, 1867; Mills, 1956) and Human Security Theory (UNDP, 1994). Conflict Theory explains security forces as enforcers of elite interests (Wright, 2019). Galtung (1969) extends this view through the concept of structural violence. In structural violence, harm is built into ordinary institutional arrangements rather than delivered through direct physical force.

Galtung (1996) argues that lasting peace requires dismantling such structures, not merely ending overt conflict. Human Security Theory centres individual dignity and participation (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy, 2007), though Paris (2001) cautions that the concept remains contested. He argues it risks becoming so broad that it loses analytical precision. This study uses Human Security in its narrower sense: freedom from violence and fear. This keeps the concept anchored to the study's empirical focus. Together, these frameworks provide both a structural critique of existing arrangements and normative guidance for reform.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to capture participants' experiences of abuse, using a case study design that enabled in-depth exploration of Marange. The target population comprised 846 individuals, from which a sample of 90 participants was selected. Purposive sampling identified knowledgeable participants, while snowball sampling reached hidden populations. The final sample included 60 community members, 20 private security guards, 4 state security officials, and 6 headmen. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 participants and focus group discussions involving 80 participants across 10 groups. Thematic analysis (Saldaña, 2021) involved familiarisation, coding, and theme development. Ethical clearance was obtained, and informed consent, anonymity, and secure data storage were ensured throughout the study.

Results

Existing mechanisms for addressing grievances and their effectiveness

Community members consistently revealed that although several mechanisms for redress exist, these mechanisms are largely ineffective. Participants described frustration over the lack of accountability and transparency when abuses occur. One elderly villager lamented: *"We have traditional leaders and NGOs, but their words carry no power. When we report an issue, the soldiers or police tell us that these people have no authority over them."* Another woman remarked: *"We report through our councillor or headman, but nothing happens. The soldiers act as if they are above everyone, even the chief."* A women's group participant shared: *"We are told to report through the traditional leaders, but when the soldiers hear, they come to our houses at night and threaten us."* A youth participant added: *"Some NGOs come to teach us about human rights, but they can't confront the soldiers. It's like knowing your rights but having no one to defend them."*

Key informants from the security sector offered a different perspective. Personnel acknowledged that internal disciplinary systems exist to handle misconduct, including company grievance procedures and chain-of-command investigations. However, personnel admitted that such systems are rarely activated in cases involving civilians. A private security officer explained: *"If someone complains against a guard, management usually conducts an internal hearing, but it's not public. Sometimes the issue is solved quietly, and the guard is moved to another location."* A police officer

added: *"People fear coming forward, and without official reports, we cannot act. Also, some of these cases involve big companies, so there's pressure to handle things 'internally.'"*

Community and key informant accounts converge on several points, while diverging on others. Both groups agree that internal company hearings rarely lead to public sanction. Community members could not describe any successful case. The private security officer confirmed that guards are quietly relocated rather than disciplined. Both groups also agree that official reporting requirements exclude poor complainants, since community members lack documents that police say they require. The two groups diverge on responsibility. Community members frame police inaction as complicity with security forces. The police officer frames it instead as a resourcing problem, tied to a lack of official reports. This divergence itself is informative. It suggests that police view the burden of proof as resting with victims. This is precisely the burden that community members say they cannot meet.

Traditional leaders remain accessible to community members but appear largely ineffective as a grievance mechanism, according to participants. Several participants stated that they had stopped approaching chiefs because their words carry no power. The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission and National Peace and Reconciliation Commission are largely inaccessible to rural Marange communities. Several participants stated that their offices are located in Harare, far from Marange. Many did not know these commissions exist at all. No participant identified a mechanism that provides protection from retaliation for complainants.

Several women described receiving night visits from soldiers after reporting abuses. Taken together, community and informant accounts show that each mechanism examined here retains a formal existence while losing any practical capacity to protect complainants.

Community participation in shaping security policies and monitoring mining operations

Community members expressed a strong belief that they should play a central role in shaping both security and mining governance. One villager explained: *"We live here and see everything that happens, but those who make the decisions never come to listen to us. We should also be sitting in their meetings and air our views regarding security."* A youth leader shared: *"If they consulted us, we could help them identify peaceful ways to manage the miners. Instead, they only come with soldiers and randomly beat people."* A leader from an Apostolic church added: *"We need community committees that work with both the companies and security forces so that we can talk about our problems instead of fighting."* A traditional leader stated: *"If the government and companies worked with us, we could ensure that mining benefits the people instead of causing conflict."* The local councillor commented: *"Communities are not passive victims. They have valuable knowledge about local dynamics. Involving them in policy discussions would reduce unemployment."*

Key informants from the security sector showed mixed attitudes toward community involvement. A state security officer remarked: *"The company has incorporated some local youths in our workforce as security guards, but they lack experience and*

training. It is ideal that they should go into training before employed." Another officer suggested: *"Locals should form their own security groups to work together with us. I agree that talking to communities can help avoid unnecessary conflicts."*

A private security guard stated: *"Sometimes, when we involve the local leaders, people cooperate better. They understand the rules, and we avoid fights. The problem is that we rarely hold such meetings."*

Community and key informant accounts converge on the value of consultation, though not on its urgency. Community members frame exclusion as the central problem. The villager's observation that decision-makers "never come to listen" is echoed by the councillor's insistence that communities hold valuable local knowledge. Security personnel do not reject this framing outright. The officer who welcomed community security groups, and the guard who confirmed that involving leaders "avoids fights," both acknowledge that cooperation improves outcomes. Where the two groups diverge is in urgency and structure. Officers describe consultation as occasional and informal, something that happens "sometimes." Community members, by contrast, are demanding standing, formal committees.

This gap between occasional goodwill and structural exclusion helps explain the barriers to reporting documented across both groups. Fear of retaliation emerged as the most significant barrier. Almost every community participant described it, and several reported night visits from soldiers after filing a complaint. Lack of trust compounds this fear. Community members described previous

complainants who received no justice. Police accounts confirm that cases proceed only with official reports, which many residents cannot obtain. Bureaucratic requirements for identification documents further exclude the poorest and most marginalised residents. The powerlessness of traditional leaders removes the one alternative forum that might otherwise absorb these complaints. The absence of any protection mechanism means that silence remains, for many residents, the safer option.

Strategies to mitigate conflict between security actors and the community

Community members consistently expressed that improved accountability, transparency, and fairness would make them feel safer. A young artisanal miner stated: *"We just want to be treated like human beings. If the soldiers and guards followed the law, and did not beat us or take our stones, we would feel safe."* A female trader added: *"Safety for us means being able to move freely to sell our goods without being stopped or harassed. We need clear rules, not random treatment."* An elderly villager remarked: *"We would feel safe if the government and the companies worked with our local leaders instead of sending armed men. We trust our chiefs more than outsiders."* Another participant explained: *"We need jobs and education, not soldiers. If young people are employed, there will be no reason to fight or mine illegally."* A women's group participant shared: *"There should be a place where we can report mistreatment without fear. Many women are afraid to speak up because they think nothing will be done."* A male participant suggested: *"Local security committees*

with traditional leaders and church elders could help to monitor abuses and stop unnecessary violence."

A senior police officer offered a security-sector perspective on the same problem. He suggested: *"Safety will come when there is trust. The community should see us as partners, not enemies. We also need clearer command systems to avoid misuse of power."*

Community and key informant accounts align on one key point. Both frame safety as inseparable from trust. The artisanal miner's demand to "be treated like human beings" reflects this. So does the trader's call for "clear rules, not random treatment." Both reject arbitrary treatment as the core problem. The senior police officer's remark that "safety will come when there is trust" echoes this framing from the opposite side of the relationship. Where the accounts diverge is in proposed cause. Community members point to root causes: unemployment, and the exclusion of chiefs from security decisions. The officer instead points to internal command weaknesses, suggesting that better systems, not fewer soldiers, would restore trust. Both diagnoses, however, converge on the same prescription: clearer, more accountable structures.

Across both community members and key informants, six concrete strategies for reform emerged. Independent complaint mechanisms should sit on neutral territory, outside the control of mining companies. Several participants suggested that the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission could operate such a mechanism through a local office. Community-security dialogue forums should meet monthly at village level, facilitated by

traditional leaders. Several security personnel expressed willingness to participate if forums were properly structured. Community oversight committees should be elected rather than appointed. They should include traditional leaders and church elders. They should also have the power to investigate incidents and recommend disciplinary action. Transparency measures should include public reporting on complaints filed, investigated, and resolved, accessible even to illiterate community members. Training and accountability measures should make annual human rights training mandatory, with consequences for violations that are public and consistent. Finally, formalisation of artisanal mining, referred to locally as *magweja*, was repeatedly proposed as a way to replace violent enforcement with regulation. Several participants argued that criminalising poverty drives the cycle of conflict.

Discussion

The findings confirm that grievance mechanisms in Marange remain ineffective (ZELA, 2023; CNRG, 2022). Traditional leaders are accessible but powerless, reflecting state co-optation of customary governance (Mamdani, 1996). Mamdani (1996) traces this pattern to the colonial system of indirect rule. Chiefs were incorporated into administrative hierarchies as low-level functionaries. They were not independent representatives of their communities. That structural position, Mamdani argues, leaves traditional leaders able to voice community grievances. It leaves them largely unable to enforce any remedy against the state or its security forces. The findings from Marange are consistent with this long-standing pattern. Internal

company procedures are neither accessible nor transparent, aligning with existing critiques of corporate accountability (Wolfsteller and Li, 2022). Wolfsteller and Li (2022) find that voluntary corporate mechanisms tend to protect company reputations more effectively than they protect victims. This dynamic is clearly visible in the private security officer's account of guards being quietly relocated rather than disciplined. The failures of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission and National Peace and Reconciliation Commission reflect broader capacity constraints (ZHRC, 2022; Nyathi, 2019). Nyathi (2019) attributes these constraints to underfunding and limited geographic reach, rather than to any absence of formal legal powers. This distinction matters for reform. It points to resourcing, not redesign, as the more urgent priority. No mechanism currently provides protection from retaliation.

Fear of retaliation matches global patterns documented elsewhere (Global Witness, 2020; Amnesty International, 2023). The prevailing lack of trust reflects long-term institutional failure (Nathan, 2013), while bureaucratic requirements exclude poor rural residents from justice. The powerlessness of traditional leaders shows deliberate state marginalisation, and opaque procedures deny complainants any sense of closure. The absence of protection mechanisms means that silence remains a rational response for victims.

The community-driven strategies identified in this study align with existing proposals for security sector reform (Berg and Gabi, 2015). Berg and Gabi (2015) call for oversight bodies that sit outside the direct control of the companies and agencies

they monitor. This is precisely the arrangement that Marange participants proposed for an independent complaints mechanism. Independent mechanisms reflect the criteria set out in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (United Nations, 2011). Dialogue forums match community policing models described by Brogden and Nijhar (2005). Oversight committees reflect principles of participatory governance (Arnstein, 1969; Gaventa, 2006), and the formalisation of artisanal mining is supported by IIED (2020a). Meaningful reform, however, ultimately requires political will (Nathan, 2012). Without that will, even carefully designed mechanisms risk remaining symbolic rather than substantive, as the findings from Marange demonstrate.

These findings can also be read through the study's theoretical framework. Traditional leaders, company procedures, and the police station each retain a formal existence while losing any practical capacity to protect complainants. This pattern is consistent with Conflict Theory's account of security institutions (Marx, 1867; Mills, 1956; Wright, 2019). Such institutions serve elite interests rather than acting as neutral arbiters of disputes. Where an institution's continued operation would threaten the flow of diamond revenue to politically connected actors, it is allowed to persist in name only. Its substantive functions are hollowed out. This pattern holds across the traditional, corporate, and state mechanisms examined in this study, suggesting that the problem in Marange is structural rather than incidental. The demand for standing, formal participation, voiced throughout the findings, reflects a Human Security understanding of safety.

Safety, in this view, is something communities help define, not something delivered to them from outside (Tadjbakhsh and Chenoy, 2007; UNDP, 1994). Conflict Theory would predict considerable resistance to this demand (Wright, 2019). Those who benefit from the current arrangement have little incentive to open decision-making to the people most affected by it. The gap between what communities are asking for and what they currently have is therefore best understood as a product of interest, not oversight. Read together, the two theories suggest something important about Marange's community-driven strategies. These strategies amount to a request that security be defined with communities, rather than imposed upon them. They are also a request that those who currently benefit from unaccountable arrangements give up some of that advantage. Whether that trade is politically feasible is a question this study cannot resolve. It is, however, the question that any serious attempt at reform will eventually have to confront.

Taken as a whole, this study's findings extend the existing literature on extractive governance in three ways. First, much of the continental and regional literature documents institutional weakness at a general level. This study shows in granular detail how that weakness is experienced by the people it affects. It documents, for instance, the specific documents police demand and the specific hours at which retaliatory visits occur. Second, the study brings together bodies of literature that are often treated separately. These include work on corporate accountability (Wolfsteller and Li, 2022), on regional human rights institutions (Nathan, 2012, 2013), and on customary governance (Mamdani,

1996). Marange shows that these are not separate problems but a single, mutually reinforcing system of impunity. Weakness in one domain removes pressure to reform the others. Third, the study demonstrates that affected communities are not simply victims of this system but also its most detailed analysts. The strategies participants proposed, independent oversight, dialogue forums, and formalisation of artisanal mining, mirror recommendations found throughout the international literature. Participants arrived at these independently, through lived experience rather than academic study. This convergence between community proposals and scholarly recommendations strengthens the case for treating community input as a primary source of policy guidance. It should not be treated merely as illustrative testimony, layered onto conclusions reached elsewhere.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. It examined a single site, Marange, so findings may not generalise to other extractive communities in Zimbabwe or the region. State security officials were a small subsample, with only 4 participants, compared with 60 community members. Their perspectives may be underrepresented. Fear of retaliation, documented throughout the findings, may have shaped what participants on both sides were willing to disclose. Community members may have understated grievances out of fear. Security personnel may have understated misconduct to protect themselves or colleagues. Data were triangulated across participant accounts rather than against independent verifiable records, such as police logs or company

reports. This limits the ability to independently confirm specific factual claims. The cross-sectional design captures a single point in time. It cannot show how grievance mechanisms or community-security relations have changed over time. Purposive and snowball sampling suited the study's aim of reaching hidden and vulnerable populations. However, this approach may not capture the full range of views present in Marange.

Conclusions

This study set out to examine the accessibility and effectiveness of grievance mechanisms in Marange. It also aimed to analyse the barriers to reporting abuse and to identify community-driven accountability strategies. The findings show that existing grievance mechanisms in Marange are largely inaccessible and ineffective, and that traditional leaders remain powerless while state institutions lack capacity. No mechanism currently provides protection from retaliation for complainants. Multiple barriers prevent community members from reporting abuses, with fear of retaliation the primary barrier documented. This is compounded by a lack of trust, bureaucratic requirements, and the absence of protection mechanisms. Community-driven strategies for accountability are urgently needed, and participants consistently called for independent complaint mechanisms, community-security dialogue forums, community oversight committees, and stronger transparency measures. Beyond Marange, these findings carry implications for other extractive communities across Zimbabwe and the wider Southern African region. Similar arrangements of private security, weak state oversight, and

marginalised traditional authority persist in many of these settings. The consistency between what Marange participants proposed and what the broader international literature recommends is striking. It suggests that the barriers documented here are not unique to one diamond field. They are a recognisable pattern of extractive governance, one that this study's methods could usefully be applied to test in other settings.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed:

- The Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission should establish independent, confidential complaint mechanisms in Marange. A local office, physically present in the community rather than centralised in Harare, would directly address the accessibility barrier documented throughout this study.
- The National Peace and Reconciliation Commission should work to strengthen the role of traditional authority in security governance. This would restore to chiefs and headmen a measure of the standing they have lost.
- The Ministry of Home Affairs should mandate public incident reporting. This would let communities track how many complaints are filed and how they are resolved. Protection mechanisms must also be established for whistleblowers and witnesses, to remove the threat of retaliation that currently silences complainants. Bureaucratic requirements that exclude rural complainants, particularly demands for

identification documents that many residents cannot obtain, should be removed.

- Community-based paralegals should be trained to assist victims with reporting, following the model already in use in parts of Mozambique.
- The Ministry of Defence should establish community-security dialogue forums at village level, chaired by traditional leaders. These forums would create a routine channel for resolving disputes before they escalate.
- The Zimbabwe Republic Police and Zimbabwe National Army should mandate annual human rights training for all personnel, with clear and publicly known consequences for violations.
- Finally, community oversight committees should be formalised and given the authority to monitor security operations and refer misconduct for investigation. These committees should be composed of elected community representatives, traditional leaders, and church elders.

Data availability

The interview guide and focus group discussion guide used in this study are available from the corresponding author on request. A de-identified codebook, listing the themes and sub-themes developed during thematic analysis, is also available from the corresponding author on request. The full raw interview and focus group transcripts are not shared, even in de-identified form. Participants were assured, as a condition of

informed consent, that their individual testimony would remain confidential. This consent was approved by the Great Zimbabwe University Research Ethics Committee. Testimony would not be placed in any repository or shared beyond the research team. Many participants described fear of retaliation, including night visits from security personnel, for reporting abuses. Sharing raw transcripts, even with names removed, risks re-identification. The population of Marange is small, and many incidents described are specific and identifiable. For these reasons, the authors are unable to share full raw data. This is consistent with the approved ethics protocol and the terms under which participants agreed to take part.

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Author contributions

TB and MJ jointly conceived and designed the study. TB led data collection. MJ supervised the analysis. Both authors contributed to writing, reviewed the manuscript critically for intellectual content, and approved the final version for submission.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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