

FRIDAY, LUSAKA (21 MARCH, 2025)

ZAMBIA CIVIL SOCIETY CALL TO ACTION: UNACCEPTABLE ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMUNITY DEVASTATION

On March 11, 2025, Civil Society Organisations, Non-governmental Organisations, Alliances and Networks working in the environment and climate space, participated in the Water Pollution Indaba convened by the Ministry of Water Development and Sanitation, Ministry of Mines and Mineral Development, and the Ministry of Green Economy and Environment. This event was a response to the water contamination crisis that began on February 18, 2025, on the Mwambashi Stream and Kafue River after a tailings dam collapsed at the Sino Metal leach Limited. The Water Pollution Indaba held in Kitwe, Copperbelt Province brought together stakeholders to discuss the issue of water pollution on the Copperbelt and Zambia as a whole. While we appreciate the government's efforts to address this critical issue, we emphasize that more concrete actions are needed to prevent environmental disasters like the Chambishi dam collapse.

The Civil Society notes that on February 20, 2025, Nkana Water Supply and Sanitation Company, based in Zambia's Copperbelt Province, shut down its water supply after learning that a tailings dam at Sino Metal Tailing had burst. The contamination, which discharged into the Mwambashi Stream a tributary of the Kafue River contained heavy metals such as iron, manganese, copper, and cobalt, as well as dangerously low pH levels. Shortly after, another disaster occurred when the tailings dam at Rong Xin Limited burst, spilling effluent into the Luela Stream, another tributary of the Kafue River. In response, authorities comprising of the Zambia Air Force(ZAF), Zambia Police(ZP), Zambia Environmental Management Agency (ZEMA), and the Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit(DMMU) have sprayed lime over a 100-kilometer stretch of the Kafue River to neutralize the acid plumes and prevent further contamination. Despite these efforts, the acid plumes have travelled downstream, reaching Ngabwe and Mumbwa districts, more than 400 kilometers away from the source of the pollution.

The Civil Society notes that, these two environmental disasters have had immediate and catastrophic effects on aquatic and plant life downstream, killing fish, destroying smallholder crops, and causing large-scale biodiversity loss. The Ministry reported that the pH levels in the Mwambashi Stream dropped to an alarming low of 1.91, far below the permissible range of 6.5-8.0, indicating extreme acidity.

Recently, another pollution incident occurred in Chingola, where the collapse of the tailings dam at the Mimbula Mine Copper Project polluted the Chabanyama Stream, further complicating the already dire water supply situation for local residents. It is reported that the acid effluents have further damaged 164-200 hectares of farmland,

causing possible reduction in crop yields and further threatening the health of the people and causing more harm to the environment. These cases are not isolated; other mines in Zambia, have similarly been involved in polluting water bodies. This disturbing trend raises questions about the effectiveness and functionality of state regulators such as the Water Resources Management Authority (WARMA), the Zambia Environmental Management Agency (ZEMA), and Mines Safety Department (MSD) in enforcing environmental compliance.

The increasing frequency of such incidents calls for a critical review of our country's policies on non-compliance and the penalties associated with environmental violations and nature crimes. The February 18, 2025 acid leak, for example, caused a complete shutdown of the water supply to Kitwe, affecting schools, universities, hospitals, and homes, leaving an estimated 700,000 people without access to safe water, causing a violation of their right to water (Accessibility, Affordability, Quality, and Availability). For farming communities, this represented an irredeemable loss of their livelihoods, further deepening poverty.

To highlight how critical the Kafue River is to the lifeline to our country, it is important to recall that around 60% of Zambia's 20 million people live in the Kafue River basin, depending on it for fishing, agriculture, and industry. The Kafue River supplies drinking water to around five million people, including those in Lusaka, the capital. Heavy pollutions and contaminations on the river have potential to affect local economies and food security, reduced soil fertility and contamination of crops resulting in reduced crop yield, especially that these communities depend on fishing and Agriculture for their livelihoods. Further, the water becomes unsafe for human consumption posing serious health risks to communities that rely on the river for drinking water and irrigation.

The Civil society notes that at the Water Pollution Indaba on March 11, 2025, technical experts and management from both Sino Metals and Rong Xin mine issued public apologies to the Zambian people. They acknowledged the devastating impact their operations had on local communities and the environment. However, the apology from Rong Xin follows reports indicating that the company had attempted to conceal its environmental crime, and in the past 1-2 years had disregarded orders from ZEMA, WARMA, and MSD that had guided them to improve on their operations and standards. Furthermore, during a site visit to Rong Xin Limited's Sabina area on March 12, 2025 just one day after the Indaba, it was discovered that the company had been deliberately discharging water from its tailing dams into the Luela Stream and the surrounding wetland, which is used by smallholders for farming and fishing. This gross misconduct it's unacceptable and we highly condemn.

As civil society, we are alarmed by this growing trend and urge the following actions:

1. **Closure of Rong Xin Mine Limited:** We call for the withdrawal and closure of Rong Xin Limited, and holding the company accountable for its actions.
2. **Compensation for Affected Communities:** We demand ethical, comprehensive, and transparent compensation for the households affected by these environmental disasters, particularly considering the long-term impacts on farming communities' livelihoods.
3. **Corporate Responsibility:** We urge Sino Metals to finance and conduct cleanup efforts to restore the Kafue River. Additionally, mandate the company to adopt more stringent environmental safeguards to prevent future incidents.
4. **Clarification of Penalties:** The government must provide a transparent clarification on the punitive measures that will be imposed on environmental law violators.
5. **Comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs):** We demand a full, transparent review of the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for the three affected sites, focusing on the damage to aquatic life, crops, soil, and local livelihoods, as well as the number of citizens impacted by the water shutdown. This assessment will also ensure that the mine pays the affected communities using or based on the polluter pays principle
6. **Strengthening of Regulatory Bodies:** WARMA, MSD and ZEMA must be given more technical capacity and funding to effectively enforce environmental regulations and conduct quarterly environmental monitoring in mining areas across Zambia. This includes providing adequate training, hiring more inspectors, and investing in modern equipment.
7. **Annual Compliance Reviews:** We call for annual public sector-led reviews of compliance with environmental regulations.
8. **Remediation and Restoration:** There must be a clear and actionable plan for the remediation and restoration of affected water sources and ecosystems, particularly in rural communities and for livestock protection from heavy metal contamination.
9. **Community Engagement:** The government must engage local communities in the monitoring of mining operations and encourage reporting of any violations and ensure that communities receive a fair share of mining revenues and are compensated for any environmental or social impact.
10. **Community Awareness:** There is need for the Government and other stakeholders including CSOs to educate local communities about the potential risks and necessary precautions, such as steering clear of contaminated water or fish. Further, utilize media outlets and social media platforms to spread awareness and hold the company responsible for the contamination.

11. Community Protection: We call on the Zambia Human Rights Commission to investigate the human rights violation of communities surrounding the mines in question.

12. Emergency Response: The government must ensure that the affected communities receive clean drinking water and necessary medical aid and continue with the Control of the spill or pollution source to stop further contamination of the river.

Recognising the Zambian government's goal of increasing annual copper production from the current 800,000 metric tonnes to 3 million metric tonnes by 2031 underscores the need for strong, deliberate action to protect both the population and the environment. This is particularly critical as the government seeks to stimulate investment in mining and exploration.

As Civil society, we therefore recommend for following to prevent similar disasters and promote sustainable mining practices:

- 1. Strengthen Environmental Regulations:** Review and amend existing laws and policies to ensure they are robust and effective in protecting the environment.
- 2. Increase Transparency and Accountability:** Implement measures to ensure transparency in environmental decision-making, including public participation and access to information.
- 3. Promote Sustainable Mining Practices:** Encourage mining companies to adopt sustainable and responsible practices, including environmental impact assessments and rehabilitation plans.
- 4. Establishment of an Environmental court:** We urge the Zambian government to create a fast-track environmental crimes court to hold polluters accountable and safeguard the health of our people and the sustainability of our environment.

The Civil Society recognise the fact that some of these recommendations will not be immediately implemented but we must start somewhere. These incidents of pollution and tailings dams collapsing must serve as a wake-up call, leading to stricter oversight of mining activities to prevent future environmental disasters. Strengthening civil society engagement through dialogues such as the Water Pollution Indaba is crucial in addressing these challenges.

Finally, the Chambishi dam collapse is a wake-up call for urgent action to protect Zambia's environment, human health, and livelihoods. We, as CSOs, will continue to advocate for environmental justice, accountability, and sustainable development. We, therefore, demand that the government, mining companies, and regulators take immediate action to address this disaster and prevent similar tragedies in the future.

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SIGNED:

Zambia Alliance of Women(ZAW), Publish What You Pay(PWYP), Centre for Environment Justice (CEJ), Care for Nature Zambia (CNZ), Civil Society for Poverty Reduction(CSPR), Zambia Climate Change Network(ZCCN), Kitwe District Land Alliance, Green Living Movement, Council of Churches in Zambia(CCZ), HIVOS, Future-Preneurs Zambia, Centre for Trade Policy and Development(CTPD), Muombo Climate Change Response Organisation, Environment Africa, Caritas Zambia, Development Community Project, Info-com Media, Democratic Governance and Human Rights Advocacy, Greenit Environmental Management Movement, Green Nature Zambia, Disability Rights Watch, and Zambia Activists and Rights Defenders Network.

