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Who's in Charge? Avoiding Human Rights Responsibility in Zambia's Copper Sector

A critical discourse analysis of state–corporate relations
under conditions of economic dependence

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how human rights responsibility is constructed and negotiated between the Zambian state and foreign mining companies in Zambia's mining sector under conditions of economic dependence on foreign investment. The study is motivated by observations from an internship in Zambia, where mining was consistently framed as central to development while questions of responsibility remained unclear. Against this background, the study asks how the Zambian state and foreign mining companies articulate and negotiate human rights responsibilities within Zambia's mining sector. While existing research has examined mining governance and corporate responsibility, less attention has been paid to how responsibility is discursively distributed between actors in resource-dependent contexts. The study analyses policy documents, corporate reports, and international assessments from 2019–2025 using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Bacchi's WPR approach. The findings show that human rights are not constructed as a primary problem within mining governance, but are instead embedded within broader narratives of economic development and investment. Responsibility is systematically displaced, as both state and corporate actors emphasise the limits of their own roles while shifting responsibility onto the other. This produces a governance dynamic in which accountability is fragmented and diffused rather than enforceable, highlighting how economic dependence shapes the ways responsibility is articulated, negotiated, and constrained within Zambia's mining sector.

Key words: Human rights responsibility, Mining governance, Foreign investment, Copper, Zambia

Words: 19393

List of Abbreviations

Barrick	Barrick Gold Corporation
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
ESG	Environmental Social Governance
ESIA	Environmental and Social Impact Assessments
FDI	Foreign Direct Investments
FQM	First Quantum Minerals
ISDS	Investor-State Dispute Settlement
MNC	Multinational Corporation
SwEPA	Swedish Environmental Protection Agency
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNGP	United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights
WPR	What's the Problem Represented to be?
ZCCM	Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines
ZEMA	Zambia Environmental Management Agency

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1 Introduction: Framing human rights responsibility in Zambia's mining sector

The challenge of transforming abundant natural resources into sustainable development has long confronted many post-colonial states. Across the African continent, countries endowed with significant mineral wealth continue to grapple with persistent underdevelopment, economic dependency, and structural inequality. Zambia represents a particularly compelling case. Rich in copper, gold, and emeralds, Zambia has historically viewed mining—especially copper extraction—as a vehicle for economic growth and poverty reduction. Yet alongside its economic importance, the mining sector has also generated significant social and environmental challenges.

Mining-related accidents and environmental degradation highlight the significant human rights risks associated with extractive industries. Although the mining sector employs only around 1% of the global workforce, it accounts for approximately 8% of fatal workplace accidents (ILO, 2024). Beyond occupational risks, mining activities frequently affect surrounding communities through water contamination, pollution, and environmental degradation, raising broader concerns related to health, access to clean water, and livelihoods (Baraza et al., 2024). These risks materialise in concrete incidents. In 2023, a tailings dam collapse at the Sino-Metals Leach Zambia mine contaminated local water sources, raising concerns over environmental damage, public health, and access to safe water (Gondwe, 2025). Such incidents illustrate how the impacts of mining extend

beyond extraction sites and raise broader questions regarding responsibility for human rights protection in resource-dependent contexts.

Today, mining constitutes the backbone of Zambia's export earnings, a major source of government revenue, and a central pillar of its integration into global markets. At the same time, studies show that the dominance of multinational corporations (MNCs) in extractive activities has reinforced Zambia's economic dependency on copper, limiting diversification and exacerbating vulnerabilities to commodity price fluctuations (Kaonga et al., 2025). The sector is heavily reliant on foreign direct investment, placing multinational corporations at the centre of production, capital provision, and technological expertise.

This economic reliance creates a structural tension. While foreign investment is essential for sustaining economic growth, it may also constrain the state's ability to regulate the sector and enforce human rights protections. In this context, documented challenges—including environmental degradation, unsafe working conditions, and community displacement—are not only issues of regulatory failure, but are embedded in broader structures of economic dependency and asymmetrical power relations between multinational corporations, the state, and affected communities.

This tension between economic dependence and human rights protection forms the central problem of this thesis. Rather than treating responsibility as fixed or legally determined, this study examines how human rights responsibility is constructed, negotiated, and constrained within policy and corporate discourse in Zambia's mining sector under conditions of economic dependence.

1.1 Research problem and questions: responsibility in Zambia's mining sector

While a substantial body of research examines human rights violations, corporate social responsibility, and governance in extractive industries, less attention has

been paid to how responsibility itself is constructed and negotiated under conditions of economic dependence. Existing studies on Zambia have focused on corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, regulatory challenges, and institutional outcomes (e.g., Aurélien et al., 2022; Mbilima, 2021), while broader scholarship highlights governance gaps and power asymmetries in global extractive regimes.

What remains underexplored is how state actors, multinational corporations, and civil society discursively frame responsibility, obligation, and legitimacy in such contexts. Against this background, the study asks how human rights obligations are articulated, prioritised, or marginalised in policy and corporate discourse. Examining this question is particularly important within global studies, where attention is directed toward the local–global continuum and the ways transnational economic forces shape domestic governance practices (Darian-Smith & McCarty, 2017). By focusing on discourse rather than solely on regulatory outcomes, this study addresses a gap in the literature on how structural dependency and power asymmetries shape the articulation of human rights responsibility within extractive governance. The selected timeframe (2019–2025) captures a period in which mining companies increasingly integrated human rights language into environmental social governance (ESG) and sustainability reporting, providing a relevant context for analysing these dynamics.

The overarching research question is:

How do the Zambian state and foreign mining companies construct and negotiate human rights responsibilities in Zambia’s mining sector under conditions of economic dependence?

The following sub-questions further guide the analysis:

1. How does the Zambian state frame its obligations to protect human rights within its mining policies and regulatory frameworks?

2. How do foreign mining companies frame their responsibilities and legitimacy in Zambia, and how are tensions between economic imperatives and human rights addressed in their discourse?
3. How do state and corporate discourses on human rights reflect and reproduce broader global power asymmetries embedded in relationships between multinational corporations and economically dependent states?

1.2 Defining key concepts for analyzing human rights and responsibility

This thesis applies three key concepts: human rights, responsibility, and economic dependence. These are treated not as fixed or universal categories, but as contextually shaped and analytically defined within Zambia's mining sector.

Human rights in extractive industries are, in this study, understood as both formal legal standards and broader normative claims related to labour conditions, environmental protection, and community well-being. Within the context of extractive industries, human rights are not treated as self-evident obligations, but as issues that are interpreted, framed, and sometimes diluted within policy and corporate discourse.

Responsibility in state–corporate relations is conceptualised as a relational and contested concept concerning how obligations, accountability, and legitimacy are distributed between state and corporate actors. Rather than assuming a fixed division of roles, the study examines how responsibility is constructed, negotiated, and limited through discourse, particularly in relation to the distinction between state protection and corporate respect.

Economic dependence in this study refers to Zambia's reliance on mineral exports and foreign investment as a central feature of the national economy. While the study primarily employs the term economic dependence, postcolonial perspectives on economic dependency inform the broader theoretical understanding of these

relations. Drawing on postcolonial and neo-Gramscian perspectives, these conditions are further understood as embedded within broader structures of dependency that shape governance priorities, regulatory capacity, and the articulation of human rights responsibility.

Together, these concepts provide the analytical foundation for examining how human rights responsibility is constructed and negotiated under conditions of economic dependence in Zambia's mining sector.

1.3 Outlining the thesis

This chapter has introduced the research problem, research questions, and key concepts guiding the study. By situating Zambia's mining sector within broader debates on economic dependence, foreign investment, and human rights governance, the introduction has outlined the central tension that motivates the thesis: how human rights responsibilities are constructed and negotiated in a resource-dependent economy.

The thesis proceeds by first situating Zambia's mining sector as the empirical context, outlining its economic centrality, structural dependence on foreign investment, and relevance for analysing human rights governance. This is followed by a review of the existing literature on mining governance, economic dependence, foreign investment, and business and human rights, which identifies the key empirical and analytical gaps addressed in this study.

Building on this foundation, the theoretical framework combines postcolonial theory, neo-Gramscian political economy, and framing theory to analyse how structural dependency and power relations shape the construction of responsibility. The methodological chapter then outlines the study's constructivist approach, qualitative case study design, and the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in combination with Bacchi's WPR framework, alongside reflections on data selection, positionality, and ethics.

The empirical analysis examines how responsibility is constructed, distributed, and contested across state and corporate discourse, focusing on problem representations, underlying assumptions, silences, and their effects. The analysis demonstrates that human rights are not constructed as a primary problem within mining governance, but are instead embedded within broader narratives of economic development and investment. In this framing, underdevelopment is positioned as the central challenge, while mining expansion is constructed as the primary solution, contributing to the displacement and fragmentation of responsibility between state and corporate actors. The thesis concludes by synthesising the main findings of the analysis in relation to the research questions, demonstrating how responsibility is constructed and constrained under conditions of economic dependence. It also reflects on the study's methodological and analytical limitations and outlines avenues for future research.

2 Situating the Zambian mining sector as the empirical case

2.1 Justifying Zambia as a case: mining, dependence, and human rights relevance

Zambia constitutes a critical case for examining the relationship between economic dependence, extractive industries, and human rights governance. The country is one of the world's major copper producers, and mining plays a central role in its economy, accounting for a substantial share of export earnings, government revenue, and foreign direct investment. As highlighted in the introduction, mining is not merely one sector among others, but forms the backbone of Zambia's economic structure and its integration into global markets. This makes Zambia particularly relevant for analysing how human rights responsibilities are negotiated in contexts where economic stability is closely tied to extractive industries and foreign capital.

The country's mining sector reflects broader structural characteristics commonly identified in such contexts, including reliance on foreign investment, exposure to global commodity markets, and constrained policy autonomy, conditions often linked to historically rooted patterns of extraction and external economic orientation associated with colonial rule. In Zambia, this is particularly evident in the central role of copper mining, which constitutes the main source of export earnings and a key driver of foreign direct investment and government revenue. These conditions shape how the mining sector is governed, as the state must balance the need to attract and retain investment with the regulation of its social and environmental impacts. As such, Zambia provides a relevant context for examining how responsibility is organised within extractive industries,

particularly in settings where economic dependence and regulatory challenges intersect.

Zambia's mining sector has been associated with a range of documented human rights and environmental concerns. A widely reported example is the 2023 Sino-Metals Leach Zambia tailings dam collapse, which contaminated water sources used by surrounding communities and raised concerns regarding environmental damage and access to safe water (Gondwe, 2025). Beyond this incident, studies have linked mining activities in Zambia to broader patterns of pollution, land degradation, and risks to livelihoods and public health. Taken together, these challenges illustrate broader governance tensions surrounding environmental regulation, enforcement capacity, and human rights protection within extractive industries (Pure Earth, 2023).

The global significance of Zambia's mining sector is reinforced by the strategic importance of copper in electrification and the global energy transition. Rising demand linked to renewable energy infrastructure, electric vehicles, and power systems has increased the economic and geopolitical importance of copper in global markets (Dagens Industri). For Zambia, this creates both opportunities and constraints: while growing demand strengthens the sector's economic importance, it also reinforces reliance on extractive exports and foreign investment.

Taken together, Zambia's mining sector represents a context in which economic dependence, global market integration, and human rights challenges intersect. This makes it a particularly suitable case for examining how responsibility is constructed and negotiated within extractive governance, and how these constructions are shaped by broader political-economic conditions.

2.2 Introducing key corporate actors shaping mining governance in Zambia: FQM and Barrick

This study focuses on First Quantum Minerals (FQM) and Barrick Gold Corporation (Barrick), two of the largest multinational mining companies operating in Zambia and among the most influential actors within the country's extractive sector. Both companies are Canadian-based corporations engaged in large-scale copper extraction and represent major sources of foreign investment, export revenue, and employment.

FQM operates the Kansanshi and Sentinel copper mines in Zambia's Copperbelt region, as well as the Enterprise nickel mine in the North-Western Province. Sentinel is the country's largest copper mine by production (GlobalData, 2022). Barrick operates the Lumwana copper mine, also one of Zambia's largest mining operations (Barrick; GlobalData, 2022). Through these operations, both companies occupy strategically important positions within Zambia's economy and mining governance.

The analytical significance of FQM and Barrick lies not only in their economic scale, but also in their role as multinational actors operating at the intersection of global capital, national governance, and local communities. Their size, investment capacity, and discursive positioning make them particularly influential in shaping how mining, development, and human rights responsibility are articulated and legitimised within Zambia's mining sector. Focusing on these actors therefore enables an analysis of how corporate responsibility is constructed under conditions of economic dependence.

3 Literature Review: Understanding mining, dependency, and responsibility

The literature review adopts a narrative approach, synthesising and critically engaging with scholarly debates on mining governance, business and human rights, and foreign investment. Rather than applying systematic inclusion criteria, the review is organised thematically related to the thesis research question, in order to map key conceptual debates and identify gaps relevant to the research question (Bryman, 2014). The first theme aims to set out the broad mining landscape in Zambia, to then continue to delve deeper into foreign investments, to lastly continue to investigate human rights in the extractive sector.

3.1 Explaining structural dependence in Zambia's mining sector

A substantial body of scholarship examines the historical and structural foundations of Zambia's mining economy, with particular attention to its long-standing dependence on copper exports and foreign capital. This literature spans historical, political-economic, and policy-oriented approaches, collectively demonstrating how Zambia's mining sector has been shaped by shifting ownership regimes, global market integration, and enduring asymmetries in power and control.

Historical analyses provide the foundation for understanding this dependence. Sikamo et al. (2016) show that large-scale industrial copper mining expanded under colonial rule through foreign-owned companies, embedding Zambia within global commodity markets from the outset. Although their study dates from 2016,

it remains analytically valuable in documenting the historical foundations of Zambia's mining economy and the structural centrality of copper exports. Their work highlights how the sector developed as outward-oriented and export-dependent, with foreign capital playing a dominant role in production and infrastructure development. This historical trajectory is further developed by Ng'ambi (2023), who interprets colonial mining not only as economic development, but as the origin of structural dependency. Through a historical and legal analysis of nationalisation, privatisation, and investor–state relations, Ng'ambi demonstrates how shifts in ownership—from state control under Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines (ZCCM) to renewed foreign dominance—did not fundamentally alter Zambia's reliance on external capital or global price dynamics.

Building on this historical foundation, more recent scholarship examines how dependence is reproduced in contemporary governance and economic structures. Kaonga et al. (2025) analyse stakeholder influence on foreign direct investment (FDI) using a mixed-methods design combining econometric modelling and qualitative data. Their findings show that Zambia's mining sector remains heavily reliant on foreign investment, which contributes significantly to export earnings and government revenue while simultaneously reinforcing vulnerability to external shocks and limiting policy autonomy. Similarly, Aurélien et al. (2022) investigate how the allocation of mining rights shapes the distribution of economic benefits among stakeholders. Through document analysis and field-based interviews, they demonstrate that the governance of mining rights is central to how benefits are distributed, but that these processes often fail to ensure equitable outcomes, highlighting tensions between economic growth and broader developmental goals.

A broader political economy perspective is offered by Bebbington et al. (2018), who analyse extractive governance through a political settlements framework across multiple countries, including Zambia. Their work shifts the focus from institutional weakness alone to the role of historically embedded power relations,

elite bargaining, and political coalitions in shaping governance outcomes. In the Zambian case, they show how transitions between colonial rule, nationalisation, and privatisation reflect changing political settlements, in which control over mineral rents remains central to state–elite relations. This perspective underscores that mining governance cannot be understood purely in technical or institutional terms, but must be situated within broader configurations of power.

Additional scholarship on industrial policy and local economic development highlights the limits of mining-led growth. Caramento (2020) examines local content policies and backward linkages in Zambia’s mining sector, drawing on interviews and procurement data. The analysis shows that, despite increased production and foreign investment, mining has generated limited domestic industrial development, with weak linkages to local suppliers and limited value addition. This reinforces the argument that dependence is not only external, but also internal, in the sense that mining remains poorly integrated into the broader economy.

Building on these perspectives, Hinfelaar and Achberger (2017) provide a political settlements analysis of Zambia’s mining sector, arguing that development outcomes are shaped by inter-elite power relations rather than institutional capacity alone. They introduce the concept of “extraversion” to describe how Zambia’s integration into the global economy has historically been used as a resource within domestic political struggles. From this perspective, dependence is not only economic but politically reproduced through elite bargaining and short-term policy incentives, which helps explain why mineral wealth has not translated into broad-based development.

Taken together, this literature demonstrates that Zambia’s mining sector is characterised by persistent structural dependence on copper exports and foreign capital, shaped by historical legacies, global market integration, and unequal power relations. While these studies provide important insights into the economic, legal, and political dimensions of dependence, they share a common limitation:

they primarily focus on material structures, institutional arrangements, and developmental outcomes. Less attention has been paid to how these structural conditions shape the ways in which responsibility—particularly for human rights—is constructed, articulated, and negotiated between state and corporate actors. This study addresses this gap by shifting the analytical focus from the structural conditions of dependence alone to the discursive construction of responsibility within those conditions. In doing so, it builds on existing insights into Zambia’s mining economy while examining how dependency not only constrains governance, but also shapes how responsibility is defined, limited, and legitimised in policy and corporate discourse.

3.2 Analysing how foreign investment structures economic dependence

While the previous section established the historical foundations of Zambia’s dependence on mining, existing research shows that this dependence is not only economic but institutionally and structurally embedded through foreign investment regimes. Rather than functioning as neutral capital flows, foreign investments are governed through legal, financial, and discursive frameworks that shape the relationship between multinational corporations and host states.

A central strand of scholarship highlights the role of international investment law in structuring these relations. Perrone (2021) argues that foreign investors operate within a legal architecture designed to stabilise expectations and protect capital through mechanisms such as investment treaties and investor–state dispute settlement (ISDS). Similarly, Phillips (2025) demonstrates that mining contracts and arbitration frameworks embed asymmetrical power relations by constraining state regulatory capacity and prioritising investor protections. Together, these studies suggest that limitations on state authority are not merely the result of weak governance, but are structurally embedded within legal arrangements that favour investors.

Beyond formal legal structures, other research emphasises the financial and discursive dimensions of foreign investment. Gilbert (2020) shows how narratives of political risk and investment uncertainty are constructed within global financial markets, shaping how resource-rich countries are perceived and governed. These narratives do not simply reflect reality but actively influence it, positioning host states as dependent on maintaining investor confidence and thereby reinforcing constraints on regulatory action.

While much of this scholarship is not specific to Zambia, it provides a conceptual framework for understanding how foreign investment structures power relations in resource-dependent contexts. This is supported by empirical research from Zambia, where Kaonga et al. (2025) demonstrate that the mining sector is heavily reliant on foreign direct investment and remains central to export earnings and government revenue. Their findings highlight the ongoing tension between attracting investment and maintaining regulatory control, illustrating how economic dependence can limit policy autonomy.

Ultimately, this literature shows that foreign investment in extractive industries is embedded within legal protections, financial practices, and discursive constructions that collectively reinforce asymmetrical relations between multinational corporations and host states. However, while existing research has examined these structural dynamics, less attention has been paid to how they shape the way responsibility is articulated and negotiated between actors. This study addresses this gap by analysing how foreign mining companies and the Zambian state construct and delimit human rights responsibility within this context of structurally embedded dependence.

3.3 Examining how responsibility for human rights is allocated in extractive industries

While the previous section examined how economic dependence structures state–investor relations, this section turns to how responsibility for human rights is conceptualised and allocated within extractive industries. Existing scholarship shows that such responsibility is neither fixed nor self-evident, but shaped through evolving governance frameworks and contested interpretations.

At the centre of contemporary debates is the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), which establish a global framework distinguishing between the state duty to protect and the corporate responsibility to respect human rights. As Rasche and Waddock (2021) show, the UNGPs embed corporate responsibility within a broader governance architecture largely grounded in voluntary CSR initiatives. While widely adopted, this framework remains legally non-binding. Scholars such as Joseph & Kyriakakis (2023), therefore emphasise its soft-law character and limited enforceability, particularly in contexts where multinational corporations operate across jurisdictions with uneven regulatory capacity. Similarly, Assenza (2025) notes that the effectiveness of the UNGPs depends heavily on domestic political will and institutional implementation.

Critical scholarship further argues that this governance model reflects a broader tension between normative commitments and enforceable accountability. Deva (2020) highlights how the evolution of business and human rights has been shaped by ongoing compromises between voluntary and binding approaches, resulting in a system where corporate responsibilities are recognised but weakly enforced. Within extractive industries, this tension becomes particularly visible. Coumans (2017) demonstrates how mining companies often incorporate human rights into existing CSR frameworks, translating them into managerial tools such as impact assessments and grievance mechanisms rather than binding obligations. Building

on this critique, Kemp and Owen (2022) conceptualise this dynamic as a form of “organised irresponsibility,” where corporations can simultaneously claim responsibility while diffusing accountability in practice.

Alongside these governance debates, a large body of empirical research documents the human rights risks associated with extractive industries. Systematic reviews show that mining activities are frequently linked to land dispossession, livelihood loss, and community marginalisation across African extractive contexts, including countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ghana (Idemudia et al., 2022). Studies on labour and inequality further highlight how mining restructures social hierarchies and produces differentiated access to benefits and risks, as illustrated in the Congolese copperbelt, where labour market segmentation reinforces structural inequalities (Rubbers, 2019). Research on displacement, health, and environmental impacts similarly demonstrates that extractive projects can generate uneven and contested development outcomes across communities, with studies linking environmental degradation to health inequalities in African mining regions (Leuenberger et al., 2021), and evidence from Zambia showing how mining-related resettlement and mobility produce differentiated socio-economic and health outcomes (Farnham et al., 2022). These patterns suggest that while empirical manifestations vary across contexts, similar structural dynamics of inequality and marginalisation recur across resource-dependent economies.

Taken together, the literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that Zambia’s mining sector is shaped by enduring structural dependence on mineral exports and foreign investment, while human rights governance in extractive industries remains contested and unevenly enforced. Existing scholarship provides valuable insights into mining governance, investment regimes, and corporate responsibility frameworks, as well as the social and environmental impacts associated with extractive activities. However, this body of research has tended to focus either on institutional arrangements or empirical outcomes, rather than examining how responsibility itself is constructed, framed, and negotiated between state and

corporate actors. As a result, the categories of “state responsibility” and “corporate responsibility” are often treated as given, rather than analysed as products of specific political-economic and discursive conditions. This gap is particularly significant in resource-dependent contexts, where structural constraints and global power asymmetries shape not only governance outcomes, but also the terms through which responsibility and legitimacy are articulated. Understanding how responsibility is constructed in such contexts is therefore essential for explaining how accountability is enabled, limited, or displaced within extractive governance.

This study addresses this gap by analysing how responsibility for human rights is discursively constructed within Zambia’s mining sector under conditions of economic dependence. By focusing on discourse rather than institutional design or empirical outcomes alone, the study examines how responsibility is not only allocated, but actively shaped and constrained within policy and corporate narratives. Addressing this question requires a theoretical framework capable of connecting structural political-economic conditions with the discursive practices through which responsibility is articulated. The following chapter therefore outlines the theoretical approach guiding the analysis, drawing on postcolonial theory, neo-Gramscian political economy, and framing theory to examine how responsibility, power, and economic dependence intersect in Zambia’s mining governance.

4 Theoretical framework: Analysing power, dependency, and discourse

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework guiding the study. The analysis combines insights from postcolonial theory, neo-Gramscian international political economy, and framing theory in order to examine both the structural and discursive dimensions of Zambia's mining governance. Postcolonial theory provides a historical perspective on global inequalities and the enduring legacies of colonial extraction. Neo-Gramscian theory explains how these hierarchies are reproduced within the contemporary global political economy through relations between states, transnational capital, and international institutions. Framing theory complements these structural perspectives by analysing how actors discursively construct issues of mining, responsibility, and human rights in policy and corporate discourse. Together, these perspectives enable a multi-layered analysis that connects historical structures of dependency, contemporary global power relations, and the discursive practices through which responsibility and legitimacy are articulated and negotiated.

4.1 Postcolonial theory: understanding historical and structural dependency

Postcolonial theory provides a framework for analysing how formally sovereign states may remain structurally embedded within asymmetrical global economic relations. Rather than treating underdevelopment as primarily the result of internal governance failures, postcolonial perspectives situate resource-dependent economies within the historical dynamics of colonial extraction and global capitalist expansion. As Robert Young (2001) argues, postcolonial theory examines the enduring political, economic, and cultural effects of colonial rule and how these continue to shape contemporary global inequalities. While

alternative approaches such as dependency theory also highlight structural disparities between core and peripheral economies, they focus primarily on macroeconomic relations of production and capital accumulation. Postcolonial theory instead links contemporary economic dependence to longer historical trajectories of colonial extraction, global hierarchies, and systems of representation. Young (2001) identifies Edward Said as a foundational figure in the field, alongside influential scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The present study draws primarily on the political–economic analyses of Samir Amin, Kwame Nkrumah and Walter Rodney, together with Said’s analysis of colonial discourse.

Samir Amin is widely regarded as a central figure in postcolonial political economy. His work develops a structural critique of capitalism that emphasises the enduring inequalities between the global “centre” and “periphery” produced through colonial expansion and imperialism (Kvangraven et al., 2021). Amin (2003: 1) conceptualises capitalism as an inherently polarising world system in which peripheral economies are integrated primarily through externally oriented accumulation and commodity extraction. In this configuration, integration into global markets does not produce convergence but reproduces structural dependency. Amin further argues that contemporary capitalism is characterised by oligopolistic control over finance, technology, and resource access, enabling multinational corporations to capture what he terms “imperialist rent” (Amin, 2011). For resource-dependent economies reliant on foreign investment in extractive sectors, this creates asymmetrical bargaining relations between host states and globally mobile capital. Amin’s framework therefore provides a structural lens for analysing how economic dependency shapes the conditions under which human rights responsibilities are articulated within Zambia’s mining governance.

Kwame Nkrumah is widely regarded as a central figure in anticolonial political thought and postcolonial theory. As Ghana’s first president and a leading Pan-Africanist, Nkrumah developed a critique of imperialism showing how

colonial domination could persist after formal independence through economic and political structures (Kanu, 2013). His concept of neo-colonialism captures how colonial domination may persist after formal independence through economic and political structures (Ibid). Nkrumah (1965: ix–x) argues that in neo-colonial conditions formally sovereign states find their economic systems externally directed through foreign investment and financial mechanisms. Sovereignty therefore becomes restricted: while political authority formally resides within the state, key economic levers remain shaped by external interests. For resource-dependent economies reliant on foreign mining capital, regulatory authority thus operates within structurally constrained boundaries.

Walter Rodney is widely recognised as a central figure within African radical political economy and anticolonial thought. His work, most notably *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, analyses how colonial expansion and global capitalism restructured African economies and produced enduring patterns of dependency (Temin, 2023). Rodney (1981) argues that African underdevelopment was not an original condition but a consequence of integration into European capitalist expansion. Through the slave trade and colonial rule, African economies were reorganised to serve external interests, orienting production toward the export of raw materials and the expatriation of surplus. Colonialism therefore fundamentally reshaped economic structures while undermining diversified domestic accumulation. As Rodney demonstrates, many postcolonial economies inherited these externally oriented production systems after independence, leaving development trajectories closely tied to global demand and foreign capital.

Together, the works of Amin, Nkrumah and Rodney highlight how colonial extraction and global capitalism produced enduring structures of economic dependency that continue to shape the political economy of resource-rich states. While Amin, Nkrumah and Rodney foreground the structural and historical dimensions of dependency, Edward Said shifts attention to the cultural and discursive terrain through which such hierarchies are made intelligible and legitimate. In *Orientalism*, Said (1977: 32, 2-3, 36, 40) argues that imperial

domination was sustained not only by military and economic power but also by systems of representation that constructed the non-West as inferior, backward, and in need of guidance. Knowledge about colonised regions therefore functioned as an instrument of authority, linking representation and power. Said later demonstrated how such imperial representations persist within narratives of development and progress even after the end of formal colonial rule (Said, 1989: 207, 211-213; Said, 1993: 9-12, 282, 290).

Applied to Zambia's mining sector, Said's insight suggests that the negotiation of human rights responsibility does not occur in a neutral discursive space. Rather, language around "investment necessity," "capacity-building," "partnership," and "development contribution" may operate within historically sedimented structures of representation that align peripheral states with need, deficiency, and reliance on external expertise. In this sense, discourse becomes a site where structural dependency is not only reflected but reproduced. By foregrounding representation as a modality of power, Said's work provides the crucial bridge between postcolonial political economy and the critical discourse analysis undertaken in this thesis. While postcolonial theory highlights the historical roots of economic dependence and global inequality, it provides less analytical detail regarding how contemporary global political economy structures shape state policy space. To address this dimension, the following section introduces neo-Gramscian theory.

4.2 Neo-Gramscian: explaining power, hegemony, and global governance

Neo-Gramscian theory provides a framework for analysing how global power relations shape the governance of resource-dependent economies. As a strand of international political economy, neo-Gramscian scholarship builds on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, to examine how power is stabilised beyond the state through the interaction of material capabilities, institutions, and dominant ideas (Okereke, 2015; Bieler and Morton, 2004: 87–88, 91–92). Within

international political economy, this perspective was developed primarily through the work of key scholars such as Robert Cox and later expanded by Stephen Gill (Bieler and Morton, 2004). Cox is widely regarded as a foundational figure in this tradition, as he reconceptualises hegemony beyond the state level as a configuration of material capabilities, ideas, and institutions that together stabilise a particular world order (Cox, 1981: 136; Cox, 1983: 139, 171). Rather than treating states as autonomous actors, neo-Gramscian theory situates them within historically specific structures of global capitalism. In Gramsci's formulation, hegemony entails not only coercion but the production of consent through civil society, where dominant groups secure leadership by presenting their interests as universal (Gramsci, 1971: 12–13; Cox, 1983: 163–164). Cox extends this insight to the international level through his concept of “historical structures,” composed of material capabilities, ideas, and institutions that operate across social forces, forms of state, and world orders (Cox, 1981: 168, 136–138).

In Gramscian terms, hegemony is sustained not only through institutions and material power but also through what Gramsci termed “common sense”—taken-for-granted assumptions that render particular social arrangements natural or inevitable (Cox, 1983: 163–164; Cox, 1981: 136–138). As highlighted in neo-Gramscian scholarship, such forms of “common sense” are central to the reproduction of hegemonic orders, as they limit the visibility and legitimacy of alternative political and economic arrangements (Okereke, 2015). Within a global political economy structured by neoliberal norms, market-oriented policies, investor protection, and competitiveness may therefore appear as pragmatic necessities rather than political choices. For resource-dependent states, this contributes to the normalisation of investor-led development as the dominant policy framework. From this perspective, resource governance is shaped not only by domestic policy choices but by historically constituted global structures shaped by transnational capital mobility, international financial institutions, and institutionalised trade and investment regimes. Multinational corporations and

global financial actors therefore represent powerful social forces that influence the policy space available to resource-dependent states.

Building on Cox, Stephen Gill further develops neo-Gramscian analysis by examining how neoliberal forms of hegemony becomes institutionalised within global governance. Through his concept of “new constitutionalism,” Gill describes the embedding of market-oriented norms within domestic and international governance arrangements (Gill, 1998: 23–24). Through legal and institutional mechanisms that prioritise market stability and investor confidence, key areas of economic governance become increasingly insulated from democratic contestation. Gill refers to this broader process as disciplinary neoliberalism, whereby globally mobile capital acquires a structurally privileged position within national and international governance (Gill, 1998: 23–25, 35; Gill, 2003: 8, 37). For resource-dependent economies reliant on foreign investment in extractive industries, such arrangements create structural incentives to prioritise regulatory predictability and investment security. Neo-Gramscian theory therefore enables this study to conceptualise Zambia’s mining sector not simply as a site of corporate–state interaction but as embedded within a wider hegemonic order in which neoliberal norms shape what appears economically rational, politically feasible, and legally legitimate.

Importantly, neo-Gramscian analysis does not assume that hegemonic orders are uncontested. As Cox (1981: 127–129) notes, hegemony is historically contingent and contains internal contradictions, yet it stabilises particular policy trajectories by rendering alternative approaches economically or politically impractical. At the same time, as emphasised in neo-Gramscian scholarship, hegemonic orders are continuously negotiated and challenged through processes of contestation and accommodation (Okereke, 2015). In the context of Zambia’s mining governance, this perspective highlights how structural dependence on foreign capital may narrow the range of viable policy options and influence how responsibility and human rights obligations are articulated within extractive governance.

4.3 Framing theory: analysing how responsibility is constructed through discourse

Framing theory has become a widely used analytical approach in studies of political communication, public policy, and social movements, providing tools for analysing how actors construct meaning and define social problems through discourse. Over the past decades, framing has developed into a broad interdisciplinary paradigm, with roots in sociology, communication studies, and political science, focusing on how meaning is produced through processes of selection, interpretation, and emphasis (Iacob, 2020: 127). While postcolonial and neo-Gramscian perspectives illuminate the historical and structural dimensions of economic dependence, framing theory enables analysis of how these structures are articulated and contested in discourse. In the context of Zambia's mining governance, it provides a framework for examining how state actors, multinational mining corporations, and civil society organisations construct and negotiate issues of mining, responsibility, and human rights in policy documents, corporate reports, and advocacy materials.

The concept of framing originates in Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis*, where frames are understood as "schemata of interpretation" that organise experience and render events meaningful (Goffman, 1974: 21, 34-40). As described by Iacob (2020: 127-128), Goffman conceptualises frames as interpretive structures that allow individuals to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" social reality, transforming otherwise fragmented events into meaningful wholes. Although Goffman's work focused on everyday interaction, his insight that social reality is structured through interpretive frameworks laid the foundation for later analyses of political communication and collective action. Drawing on this tradition, Iacob (2020: 127-128) highlights how subsequent scholars such as Entman (1993) conceptualise frames as socially shared and culturally embedded structures that organise both journalistic production and audience interpretation.

Building on this foundation, Entman (1993: 52) conceptualises framing as the selection and salience of particular aspects of perceived reality within a communicating text. Frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies (Entman, 1993: 52-55). As summarised by Iacob (2020: 127-128), this process involves emphasising certain elements while omitting others, thereby shaping how issues are interpreted and what forms of action are considered appropriate. This framework directs attention to what is emphasised, what is downplayed, and how particular solutions are legitimised within political discourse.

Framing research has further developed along two main traditions. As Iacob (2020: 127-128) explains, drawing on Scheufele and Iyengar (2011), a psychological approach—often referred to as “equivalence framing”—focuses on how different presentations of the same information influence individual perception. In contrast, a sociological or “emphasis framing” approach conceptualises framing as the process of highlighting particular aspects of an issue to promote specific interpretations. This study draws primarily on the latter, focusing on how responsibility is constructed through emphasis, omission, and the organisation of meaning within discourse.

In the context of collective action, framing processes become explicitly strategic. Snow et al. (1986: 464, 467) introduce the concept of frame alignment to describe how organisations link their interpretive frameworks with the beliefs and experiences of potential supporters. Benford and Snow (2000: 614-617) further conceptualise collective action frames as action-oriented sets of beliefs that inspire and legitimate mobilisation. They distinguish between diagnostic framing (identifying problems and attributing blame), prognostic framing (proposing solutions), and motivational framing (providing rationales for action).

Applied to Zambia’s mining sector, framing theory enables a systematic comparison of how different actors construct mining, responsibility, and human rights. State actors may frame mining as a driver of national development and

economic necessity, corporations may emphasise managerial responsibility through sustainability and compliance discourses, while civil-society organisations may highlight rights violations and accountability gaps. Through such competing frames, the meaning of responsibility becomes a site of discursive contestation.

While alternative theoretical approaches such as world-systems theory, post-structuralism, or narrative theory could also have been applied to the study of mining governance and responsibility, these were not adopted as the primary analytical framework. World-systems theory shares important similarities with postcolonial political economy in analysing global inequalities, but places greater emphasis on macro-structural economic relations than on discourse and representation (Wallerstein, 1974). Post-structural approaches and narrative theory would have provided additional tools for analysing discourse and meaning-making (Foucault, 1980). However, the combination of postcolonial theory, neo-Gramscian theory, and framing theory was considered particularly suitable for connecting historical structures of dependency, global political-economic power relations, and the discursive construction of responsibility. Together, these perspectives provide a multi-layered framework for analysing Zambia's mining governance: postcolonial theory highlights the historical roots of structural economic dependence, neo-Gramscian theory explains how global political-economic structures shape the policy space of resource-dependent states, and framing theory enables analysis of how responsibility is discursively constructed by state and corporate actors. This combined framework therefore connects structural economic conditions with the discursive practices through which human rights responsibilities are articulated and negotiated. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach used to analyse these dynamics, combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' (WPR) approach.

5 Research methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework of the study and the choices guiding the research design and analysis. The study adopts a constructivist epistemological approach, and employs an explanatory single case study design focused on Zambia's mining sector. To examine how human rights responsibilities are discursively constructed and negotiated, the study applies critical discourse analysis (CDA) in combination with Bacchi's WPR approach. The chapter proceeds by outlining the epistemological approach, research purpose, and case study design, followed by a presentation of the methods of analysis, data collection process, and considerations of positionality and ethics.

5.1 Methodological approaches: adopting a constructivist and case study approach

This study adopts a constructivist epistemological approach, grounded in a critical political economy perspective. Ontologically, it assumes that social reality is not fixed, but socially constructed through discourse, interpretation, and power relations (della Porta & Keating, 2008: 7–8). While the study engages with structural perspectives on dependency and global political economy, these structures are not treated as fixed or objectively given. Instead, the study examines how such structures are understood, reproduced, legitimised, and negotiated through discourse and institutional practices. In this sense, the constructivist approach is compatible with the study's theoretical framework, as both postcolonial and neo-Gramscian perspectives are analysed in relation to how power and dependency are discursively articulated within mining governance. This enables an analysis of how human rights responsibilities are discursively constructed and negotiated within Zambia's mining sector, rather than treated as given or objective. Building on this, the study is guided by an explanatory research purpose. In this sense, the study aims to uncover the underlying

assumptions, power dynamics, and structural constraints that shape the governance of human rights within the mining sector. To address this aim, the study adopts a qualitative single case study design, focusing on Zambia as a critical case. Zambia's mining sector provides a particularly relevant context due to its economic reliance on extractive industries and foreign capital, making it well suited for analysing how responsibility is negotiated under conditions of structural dependence. Within this case, two foreign mining companies, First FQM and Barrick, are included as embedded units of analysis. These companies represent key actors in Zambia's mining sector and provide empirical material for examining corporate discourses on responsibility. While the inclusion of two companies introduces some internal variation, the study does not adopt a comparative design. Instead, both are analysed in relation to the same research questions and within a shared structural and discursive context.

The study applies CDA in combination with Bacchi's WPR framework. Together, these approaches examine how problems, responsibilities, and power relations are articulated and normalised within the empirical material. The following section outlines these approaches and their role in the analysis.

5.2 Methods of analysis: combining CDA and WPR to analyse responsibility

5.2.1 Critical discourse analysis to analyse discourse, power, and legitimacy

CDA is a form of analytical research that investigates how social power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted through text and talk in social and political contexts (Van Dijk, 2015: 466). As a methodological approach, CDA posits that discourse is socially constitutive, meaning that it actively shapes social and political realities rather than merely reflecting them (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000: 448; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 61). In this study, discourse is therefore

understood as a form of social practice rather than a neutral vehicle for communication (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 60–61).

CDA focuses on how language is used to legitimize particular interpretations of social and political issues, while marginalizing others (Fairclough, 2013: 8). In this study, representations of human rights, development, and investment in Zambia's mining sector are analysed as discursive constructions shaped by institutional interests and broader political-economic structures.

Methodologically, CDA is a qualitative and interpretive approach that focuses on identifying patterns of meaning, framing, and representation within texts. The aim is not only to describe discourse, but to analyse how it contributes to the construction of social problems and the distribution of responsibility (Van Dijk, 2015: 467; Fairclough, 2013: 6–8). To operationalize this approach, the study draws on a three-dimensional understanding of discourse, distinguishing between (1) textual features, (2) discursive practices, and (3) broader social practices (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 67–70). At the textual level, the analysis focuses on how language and framing construct representations of responsibility. At the level of discursive practice, attention is given to how actors produce and reproduce particular narratives and assumptions. At the level of social practice, these discourses are situated within broader political and economic structures, including global power relations and Zambia's dependence on foreign investment.

These analytical levels provide the basis for examining how responsibility is constructed across textual, discursive, and structural dimensions. The following section introduces Bacchi's WPR framework, which is used to identify and interrogate problem representations within this discourse-analytical approach.

5.2.2 Bacchi's WPR analysis to identify problem representations and effects

To operationalize the discourse-analytical framework outlined above, this study employs Carol Bacchi's WPR approach as a specific analytical tool for identifying

and interrogating problem representations in policy and corporate texts. The WPR framework is grounded in poststructural policy analysis and is concerned with how policies construct social problems through discourse rather than simply responding to pre-existing issues (Bacchi, 2012b: 1). Bacchi argues that policies and policy proposals contain implicit representations of what is considered problematic, since what a policy proposes to change reveals what is understood as the “problem” in need of intervention (Bacchi, 2009: x-xii; Bacchi, 2012a: 21). In this perspective, policies are understood as practices of problematization, meaning that they actively constitute certain issues as problems while excluding alternative interpretations (Bacchi, 2009: x-xii, xvi; Bacchi, 2012b: 1; Bacchi, 2012a: 21-22, 24).

The WPR approach is operationalized through six analytical questions that guide the examination of problem representations, underlying assumptions, silences, and effects (Bacchi, 2009: x, xii, xv; Bacchi, 2012a: 21-23; Bacchi, 2012b: 4). The WPR framework is particularly suitable for the types of empirical material examined in this study. As Bacchi notes, governmental documents, policy reports, and other institutional texts provide important entry points for identifying problem representations, as they articulate proposed courses of action and thereby implicitly define what is considered problematic (Bacchi, 2012a: 21-22; Bacchi, 2012b: 4; Bacchi, 2009: x-xi). Accordingly, the analysis applies the WPR approach to three sets of documents: (1) regulatory and policy documents produced by the Zambian state, (2) corporate responsibility and sustainability reports produced by foreign mining companies operating in Zambia, and (3) reports from international organizations and non-governmental organizations. These documents are analysed to identify how human rights responsibilities are represented, negotiated, and potentially constrained within the broader political economy of Zambia’s mining sector. The analytical questions guiding the study are presented below:

1. How is human rights responsibility represented in policy and corporate discourse within Zambia’s mining sector?

2. What assumptions about development, investment, governance, and corporate responsibility underpin these representations?
3. How are these representations shaped by broader political and economic conditions, including Zambia's dependence on foreign investment?
4. What aspects of responsibility or accountability are left unproblematic or absent within these discourses?
5. What effects do these representations have for how responsibility for human rights protection is distributed between the Zambian state and foreign mining companies?
6. How are these representations reproduced and legitimized in policy documents, corporate reports, and international governance discourse?

This study combines CDA and Bacchi's WPR approach in a complementary manner. While WPR is used to identify how problems and responsibilities are represented in policy and corporate texts, CDA is applied to analyse how these representations are constructed through language, framing, and underlying assumptions. Together, these approaches enable an analysis of both the content of problem representations and the discursive mechanisms through which they are produced and legitimised.

5.3 Data collection: collecting and selecting empirical material for analysis

The empirical material for this study consists of three sets of documents: (1) regulatory and policy documents produced by the Zambian state, (2) corporate responsibility reports published by foreign mining companies operating in Zambia, and (3) reports produced by international organizations and NGOs. The selection followed a purposive sampling strategy, focusing on documents that address human rights, governance, and corporate responsibility in Zambia's mining sector. The selected timeframe of 2019–2025 captures a period in which mining corporations more visibly integrated human rights language into

sustainability and ESG reporting, providing a particularly relevant context for analysing how responsibility is discursively constructed. While most documents fall within this period, one earlier report (2016) is included due to its continued relevance in analysing mining governance, investment conditions, and institutional capacity in Zambia, particularly in identifying gaps between formal policy frameworks and their implementation in practice

Zambian policy and regulatory documents were identified through targeted keyword searches using Google, with relevant search terms related to mining governance in Zambia.

Corporate reports were selected to examine how foreign mining companies construct and communicate human rights responsibilities. Based on prior familiarity with the sector, FQM and Barrick were identified as key actors. This was supported by additional searches identifying major mining operations such as Sentinel, Kansanshi, and Lumwana—mines operated by FQM and Barrick. Relevant reports were then collected from the companies' official websites. For FQM, an ESG report was selected as the most comprehensive source, while for Barrick, both a sustainability report and a human rights report were included due to the company's reporting structure. The difference reflects variations in corporate reporting structures, as FQM consolidates disclosures within a single ESG report, while Barrick separates them across multiple documents.

Reports produced by international organizations and NGOs were identified through targeted keyword searches, including “mining governance Zambia” and “corporate accountability mining human rights Zambia”. The selection was informed by familiarity with key actors in the extractive sector, resulting in the inclusion of reports from the World Bank, the Zambian Human Rights Commission, and the Resource Governance Index (2021).

5.3.1 Selected documents: the final dataset and analytical sources

The final dataset consists of nine documents, distributed evenly across the three analytical categories. The state documents include the Eighth National Development Plan (2022–2026), the National Mineral Resources Development Policy (2022), and the National Critical Minerals Strategy (2024–2028). Together, these documents articulate how the state frames responsibility, development, and governance in relation to mining.

The corporate material consists of sustainability and human rights reports produced by FQM and Barrick. FQM’s ESG report provides a consolidated account of corporate governance, environmental management, and community engagement, including explicit sections on human rights. Barrick’s reporting is divided across a sustainability report and a dedicated human rights report, which together outline corporate commitments, risk management approaches, and the integration of human rights into operational practices. These documents are central to analysing how corporations construct and communicate responsibility within broader sustainability and development frameworks.

The third category includes reports produced by international and quasi-independent actors. The World Bank’s Mining Investment and Governance Review (2016), assesses mining governance, investment conditions, and development outcomes in Zambia. The Human Rights Commission report (2020) produced by the Human Rights Commission of Zambia, with support from the Danish Institute for Human Rights, and focuses on the corporate responsibility to respect human rights in Zambia’s mining sector. It evaluates company practices in relation to the UN Guiding Principles and identifies a persistent implementation gap, where formal commitments are not consistently translated into effective due diligence and grievance mechanisms. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SwEPA) report (2024), developed in collaboration with UNDP, examines the interaction between mining, forest governance, and deforestation in Zambia. It highlights governance challenges in balancing environmental protection with

mining expansion, emphasising the broader institutional context in which responsibility is enacted. As a governmental agency responsible for environmental policy and international cooperation, SwEPA participates in multilateral environmental governance programmes in partner countries. Its involvement in Zambia reflects broader patterns of international development cooperation, where external actors contribute expertise and assessments of governance and institutional capacity (Naturvårdsverket, 2025).

Together, these sources provide critical perspectives that complement and challenge both state and corporate narratives, enabling an analysis of how responsibility is constructed, implemented, and contested across different institutional actors. It should be noted that a broader set of documents was initially identified during the data collection process. However, several were excluded during the analytical phase, as they were assessed to offer limited additional value in relation to the study's research questions. The final selection was therefore guided not only by relevance, but also by analytical contribution, ensuring a focused and coherent dataset. This triangulation enables a comparative analysis of how responsibility is constructed, negotiated, and contested across different institutional actors. While the data collection process aims to ensure a systematic and relevant selection of documents, it is important to reflect on the researcher's position in relation to both the selection and interpretation of the empirical material. The following section therefore outlines the study's positionality and ethical considerations.

5.4 Reflecting on positionality and ethical considerations in document-based research

This study combines considerations of positionality and research ethics, as both are closely interconnected in shaping how knowledge is produced, interpreted, and represented. Given that the study does not involve interviews or human participants, ethical considerations primarily relate to research integrity,

representation, and the researcher's position in relation to the empirical material and broader global power structures. As Darian-Smith and McCarty (2017: 176, 130, 143) argue, methodological choices are not neutral but shape how research problems are framed and how empirical material is interpreted.

Following Soedirgo and Glas (2020: 527–530), positionality is understood as an ongoing and relational process that influences all stages of the research, from design to analysis. This is particularly important given the interpretive nature of CDA and the WPR approach, where the identification of problem representations, assumptions, and silences is shaped by analytical and theoretical choices. The study therefore adopts a posture of “active reflexivity,” involving continuous reflection on how interpretations are produced and how certain readings of the material are prioritised over others.

In this case, positionality is especially relevant because the study examines human rights responsibility in Zambia's mining sector from a position situated in the Global North. This influences both how the research problem is framed and how the empirical material—consisting of policy documents, corporate reports, and international assessments—is interpreted. As the study relies exclusively on institutional texts, it reflects the perspectives of state, corporate, and international actors, while the voices of affected communities are not directly represented. This creates an ethical consideration not in terms of participant protection, but in terms of representation and absence—that is, how certain perspectives are foregrounded while others remain marginalised. At the same time, the study is informed by prior field-based experience. During the autumn of 2025, I conducted an internship at the section for political, trade, and promotion at Swedish Embassy in Lusaka, Zambia. This provided insight into how mining is framed as central to economic development and how foreign investment is promoted as part of national growth strategies. This positioning within institutional environments that both observe and support mining-led development may shape sensitivity to how development, investment, and responsibility are articulated in the material. Reflexivity is

therefore necessary to critically engage with these narratives rather than reproduce them.

Ethically, the study does not involve human participants, personal data, or fieldwork interactions. As such, issues such as informed consent, anonymity, and direct harm to participants are not applicable. Instead, ethical considerations centre on how the material is selected, interpreted, and represented. This includes ensuring accurate use of sources, avoiding selective quotation, and maintaining transparency in how the analysis is conducted (Israel, 2015: 3–4, 7-8).

Given the focus on discourse and global inequality, a key ethical concern is the risk of reproducing dominant narratives or reinforcing unequal power relations. As Darian-Smith and McCarty (2017: 81, 90) argue, knowledge production is not neutral but contributes to shaping how global issues are understood. In this study, this is particularly relevant in relation to representations of development, dependency, and responsibility in Zambia's mining sector. The analysis therefore seeks to critically examine these discourses without reinforcing assumptions of deficiency, passivity, or inevitability often associated with Global South contexts.

Finally, positionality and ethics intersect in the recognition that interpretations are situated and contingent. The analysis does not claim neutrality, but rather acknowledges that it is shaped by theoretical frameworks, empirical choices, and the researcher's own position within global academic and institutional contexts. By making these conditions explicit, the study aims to strengthen both its analytical transparency and its ethical grounding.

These methodological choices shape the selection of empirical material and the interpretation of the analysis. By combining a critical discourse analytical framework with Bacchi's WPR approach, and by adopting a reflexive and ethically informed research stance, the study is equipped to critically examine how human rights responsibilities are constructed and negotiated in Zambia's mining sector. These methodological choices shape both the selection of empirical material and the interpretation of the discourses analysed, while also

acknowledging the situated and interpretive nature of the research process. In practice, the analysis was conducted through repeated and systematic readings of the selected documents. The WPR questions functioned as guiding analytical categories throughout the process, directing attention to how problems, responsibilities, assumptions, silences, and effects were articulated within the material. Particular attention was given to recurring patterns in language, framing, and representations of development, investment, and human rights. The analysis further considered how representations of responsibility operated across textual, discursive, and broader social dimensions, examining not only language and framing within the texts, but also how these representations related to wider political-economic structures and power relations. Relevant passages and quotations were continuously compared across state, corporate, and international organisation and NGO documents in order to identify dominant discourses, points of convergence, and tensions between actors. The analysis was iterative, moving between empirical material, theoretical concepts, and the analytical questions throughout the research process. The following analysis builds on this foundation by applying the analytical framework to the empirical material.

6 Analysis: Constructing and contesting responsibility in Zambia’s mining sector

The analysis is structured in five interconnected parts, reflecting the combined use of Bacchi’s WPR approach and CDA. First, the analysis identifies how economic dependence is constructed as a “problem” in the material (Section 6.1), following WPR’s focus on problem representation. Second, it examines how human rights and responsibility are discursively constructed (Section 6.2), drawing on CDA to analyse how agency, legitimacy, and roles are assigned. Third, the analysis explores silences and exclusions (Section 6.3), combining WPR’s attention to what is left unproblematic with CDA’s focus on discursive omissions. Fourth, the analysis considers the effects of these representations (Section 6.4), in line with WPR’s emphasis on the discursive and material consequences of how problems are framed. Lastly, the analysis synthesizes the findings in the four previous sections essentially bringing together problem representations, responsibility, silences, and effects in mining governance (Section 6.5). Together, this structure allows for a step-by-step analysis of how problems are constructed, how responsibility is distributed, and what implications this has under conditions of economic dependence.

6.1 Framing economic dependence as the “problem” in mining governance

This section focuses on how the “problem” is represented in Zambian policy documents and the corporate reports from the mining companies FQM and Barrick, partially complemented with reports from international organizations and NGOs. In line with Bacchi’s WPR approach, it examines how human rights responsibility is constructed and how certain issues are prioritised or

backgrounded. It also considers how these representations are shaped by broader political and economic conditions, particularly Zambia's dependence on foreign investment. In WPR terms, this section examines how the problem is constructed rather than taken for granted, focusing on how certain representations become dominant while others are excluded. Drawing on WPR questions 1 and 3 outlined in section 5.2.2, the analysis examines how the "problem" is represented in the material, as well as the underlying assumptions and presuppositions that sustain this representation. From a CDA perspective, this involves analysing how particular representations of development and responsibility are constructed through language and framing, and how alternative interpretations are marginalised (Fairclough, 2013).

Across Zambian policy documents and corporate reports, the "problem" is not primarily represented as one of human rights risk or governance failure. Instead, it is consistently framed as one of insufficient economic development and the need to maximise the benefits derived from mineral resources. In this sense, human rights responsibility is not constructed as a central problem requiring intervention, but rather as a secondary concern embedded within broader development narratives. In line with Goffman's (1974) understanding of frames as "schemata of interpretation," this can be seen as a process through which economic development is constructed as the dominant lens for interpreting mining governance. From a framing perspective, this representation defines underdevelopment as the central problem while positioning mining-led growth as the primary solution. Following Entman (1993), this can be understood as a process of problem definition in which economic development is made salient, while human rights risks are backgrounded.

This representation is particularly evident in corporate discourse, where human rights are framed as already integrated within business practices rather than as a site of potential conflict or accountability. As stated by FQM:

“While governments have the primary duty for protecting human rights, we recognize that we must respect human rights within our sphere of influence. We also recognize that we have an important role to play in promoting human rights among our stakeholders. First Quantum upholds the rights of all people whose lives are touched by the business activities we’re responsible for – no matter where they live, and regardless of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation or any other point of difference.” (FQM, 2024: 59)

This formulation explicitly assigns primary responsibility for human rights protection to governments, while positioning the company’s role as one of “respect” within a limited “sphere of influence.” The emphasis on respect, rather than protection or accountability, narrows the scope of corporate responsibility and frames human rights as an area of managed impact rather than a structural concern. Similarly, Barrick constructs human rights as fully embedded within its operations:

“At Barrick, respect for human rights is not just about having a policy that references the right frameworks, nor is it a compliance exercise. It is a fundamental part of our business philosophy and embedded throughout our business, from how we hire and train our workforce as well as how we engage with local communities and select our suppliers, to how we manage our tailings. Every decision we make considers its potential human rights impact.” (Barrick, 2024 a: 56)

Here, human rights are constructed as an internalised corporate value, suggesting that risks are already addressed through corporate governance. This removes human rights from the realm of “problems” requiring structural intervention.

Environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs) are regulatory assessments conducted prior to large-scale projects to evaluate their environmental and social impacts. This interpretation is reinforced by findings from the Human Rights Commission, which show that companies often equate human rights due diligence with existing regulatory processes. As noted:

“The majority of company interviewees equated the process of human rights due diligence with environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs) which companies are legally mandated to carry out before embarking on any large-scale mining or agriculture undertaking. However, the current implementation of ESIAs in Zambia is not geared towards identifying and addressing human rights impacts.” (Human Rights Commission of Zambia, 2020: 6)

This indicates that human rights are frequently reduced to technical compliance mechanisms rather than framed as distinct issues requiring broader accountability. From a WPR perspective, this further supports the interpretation that human rights are not constructed as a central problem within corporate discourse. A similar dynamic can be observed in Zambian policy discourse, where human rights are acknowledged but not foregrounded. For instance, the Eighth National Development Plan (hereafter 8NDP, following Zambian abbreviation) states:

“Good governance entails respect for human rights and freedoms, entrenching transparency and accountability, increasing participation, strengthening the democratic process, enhancing access to justice, observance of the rule of law and upholding national values and principles.” (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022 a: 66)

Here, human rights are not presented as a standalone issue, but are embedded within the broader and abstract category of “good governance”. The formulation “entails” suggests that human rights are one component among many, rather than a central concern in their own right. Moreover, the listing of multiple governance elements—such as “transparency,” “accountability,” and “rule of law”—positions human rights alongside other administrative and institutional principles, thereby diluting their specificity and urgency. In this way, human rights are discursively subsumed within a broader governance framework, rather than constructed as a distinct or prioritised problem. This discursive positioning contrasts with the emphasis placed elsewhere in policy documents on economic development, investment, and growth, which are more clearly articulated as central policy priorities.

This broader framing becomes clearer when examining how mining is positioned within national development strategies. Across policy documents, mining is constructed as indispensable to economic transformation and improved livelihoods, while any shortcomings are attributed to insufficient optimisation rather than structural issues. In this sense, the problem is not represented as a failure of the mining model itself, but as the incomplete realisation of its potential. These representations are shaped by broader political and economic conditions, particularly Zambia’s dependence on foreign investment and the structural role of

mining in the national economy. As noted by the World Bank, the mining sector is a major contributor to foreign direct investment and government revenue, and plays a “disproportionately large role in the national economy,” with limited success in efforts to diversify (World Bank, 2016: 6). This structural dependence reinforces the prioritisation of investment and stability in policy discourse, shaping how both problems and solutions are defined. From a postcolonial perspective, this framing can be understood as reflecting historically rooted patterns of externally oriented development, in which resource extraction is aligned with global demand rather than domestic priorities (Amin, 2003; Rodney, 1981). This reflects the structural conditions outlined in section 3.1, where Zambia’s economy is shown to be highly dependent on extractive industries for export earnings and state revenue, as well as section 3.2, which highlights the central role of foreign investment in sustaining economic growth. Corporate discourse explicitly links mining to global development processes, as illustrated by FQM:

“Mining is the supply chain for the energy transition. This presents an opportunity for responsible mining to drive socioeconomic development in emerging economies. Our mines operate to international standards and are subject to independent oversight while delivering broad benefits to the communities and to the countries in which we operate.” (FQM, 2024: 6)

By framing mining as part of the “energy transition” and as an “opportunity” for development, this discourse defines underdevelopment as the central problem while positioning extractive expansion as the primary solution. Following Entman (1993), this can be understood as a process in which certain aspects of reality—namely economic growth—are made more salient, while issues such as human rights risks and structural dependency are backgrounded. Similarly, Zambian policy documents emphasise the central role of foreign investors:

“The mining sector in Zambia is mainly characterised by the participation of foreign investors in large-scale mining, as such, the Policy seeks to stimulate the participation of Zambians in mining as well as in the entire mineral value chain which has been very low.” (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022 b: 1)

Rather than framing this reliance as a vulnerability, it is presented as a structural condition to be managed and expanded. This is further reinforced in the 8NDP, which highlights the need to ensure policy stability in order to attract and maintain private investment:

“Additionally, Zambia’s continued political stability will be cardinal for increased investment and enhanced socio-economic development. Policymakers will also be expected to commit to reviewing policies and laws that impede private sector participation to enhance its contribution to development.” (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022 a: 88)

These formulations position foreign investment as a prerequisite for development, thereby limiting the possibility of alternative problem representations. From a neo-Gramscian perspective, such discourses contribute to the normalisation of an investor-led development model, reflecting what Cox (1983) describes as the production of hegemonic “common sense,” in which particular economic arrangements are presented as natural and inevitable.

Taken together, the analysis shows that the dominant problem representation across both policy and corporate discourse is one of underdevelopment, addressed through increased mining activity and investment. Human rights responsibility is not constructed as a central problem, but is instead incorporated into broader

narratives of governance and corporate responsibility. This framing reflects and reinforces Zambia's structural dependence on extractive industries and foreign investment, while simultaneously shaping the terms within which responsibility is later constructed and negotiated. In this way, the dominant framing of mining as a development necessity reflects and reinforces the structural dynamics identified in the literature, where economic dependence and investor reliance shape both policy priorities and corporate practices. This raises an important question for the subsequent analysis: if human rights are not constructed as a central problem, but instead embedded within broader development narratives, how is responsibility for addressing them then defined and distributed? The following section therefore examines how responsibility is constructed between state and corporate actors within this discursive framework.

6.2 Constructing human rights responsibility between state and corporate actors

This section examines how responsibility for human rights is constructed and distributed between the state and corporate actors within Zambian mining discourse. Building on the problem representation identified in section 6.1, the analysis focuses on how obligations are assigned and what underlying assumptions shape this distribution. Drawing on WPR questions 1 and 2, the analysis examines how responsibility is constructed in relation to the problem representation, as well as how obligations are distributed between actors within this framework. From a CDA perspective, this involves examining how responsibility, agency, and legitimacy are discursively constructed and assigned between actors through language.

Across both corporate and policy discourse, responsibility for human rights is constructed through a clear division between state obligation and corporate commitment. Corporate actors consistently frame their role in terms of

contribution, responsibility, and ethical conduct, rather than legal obligation. As stated by FQM:

“At First Quantum, we are proud of our contribution to society. Mining is no longer simply an extractive industry. First Quantum seeks to contribute in a fair and sustainable manner to our host governments and communities as a responsible corporate citizen.”
(FQM, 2024: 3)

Similarly, Barrick emphasises ethical behaviour and internal values:

“We try to do the right thing at all times, whether or not anyone is watching, or because the law says we must. We treat our colleagues, third parties and local community members the way each of us would like to be treated. We accept our responsibility to our shareholders and all other stakeholders.” (Barrick, 2024 b: 13)

These formulations construct corporate responsibility as voluntary and value-driven, rather than legally mandated. The emphasis on being a “responsible corporate citizen” and acting beyond legal requirements frames responsibility as an ethical choice rather than a binding obligation. From a framing perspective, this defines corporate responsibility as discretionary and self-regulated, limiting its scope to what companies define as appropriate action. In line with Benford and Snow (2000), this can be understood as a form of strategic framing, in which corporate actors construct responsibility in ways that align with their organisational interests while maintaining legitimacy. This reflects a broader framing process in which responsibility is constructed in ways that delimit corporate obligation, while simultaneously expanding the perceived legitimacy of corporate actors within development processes. This framing also implies that

compliance with existing regulatory frameworks is sufficient for addressing human rights concerns, rather than requiring distinct or expanded forms of accountability. This interpretation is further supported by findings from the Human Rights Commission, which indicate that corporate responsibility is often reduced to existing compliance mechanisms. As noted:

“The majority of company interviewees equated the process of human rights due diligence with environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs) which companies are legally mandated to carry out before embarking on any large-scale mining or agriculture undertaking. However, the current implementation of ESIAs in Zambia is not geared towards identifying and addressing human rights impacts.” (Human Rights Commission of Zambia, 2020: 6)

This quotation is revisited here as it captures a recurring pattern across the material, namely the reduction of human rights responsibility to existing technical compliance mechanisms. The quote suggests that human rights are not treated as a distinct area of responsibility, but are instead subsumed within technical regulatory processes. This might reflect an underlying assumption that compliance with existing legal frameworks is sufficient for addressing human rights concerns.

The framing of responsibility as voluntary and self-regulated is closely linked to a broader development narrative in which corporate activity is positioned as inherently beneficial, obscuring potential tensions between economic objectives and human rights protection. From a neo-Gramscian perspective, such discourse contributes to the production of hegemonic taken-for-granted assumptions, in which corporate-led development and limited responsibility appear natural, necessary, and legitimate (Cox, 1983; Gill, 1998). Through this process, corporate-led development becomes stabilised as a dominant framework, limiting

the visibility of alternative forms of governance and accountability (Cox, 1983; Gill, 1998). In contrast, policy discourse positions the state as the primary duty bearer responsible for human rights protection. The 8NDP emphasises the role of governance, law, and institutional frameworks:

“Good governance entails respect for human rights and freedoms, entrenching transparency and accountability, increasing participation, strengthening the democratic process, enhancing access to justice, observance of the rule of law and upholding national values and principles.” (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022 a: 66)

This formulation is revisited as it reflects how human rights are consistently embedded within broader governance frameworks rather than treated as a distinct policy priority. Additionally, this quote constructs human rights protection as a function of state governance, rooted in legal and institutional authority. At the same time, however, the same document acknowledges limitations in state capacity:

“The provision of public services related to health, education, agriculture, public safety and order have been inadequate due to below optimal staffing levels” (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022 a: 66)

This representation rests on the assumption that the state possesses the capacity to effectively fulfil its protective role. External assessments suggest that this is not always the case. For example, a review by SwEPA identifies a “gap between policy aspirations and actual regulatory enforcement,” linked to limited resources and institutional capacity (SwEPA, 2022: 39). This challenges the assumption

underpinning the discourse, revealing a tension between the formal allocation of responsibility and the state's ability to operationalise it in practice. This introduces a clear tension within the discourse, where the state is positioned as the primary actor responsible for protection, while simultaneously lacking the resources and capacity to fully realise this role. Corporate discourse explicitly reinforces this division of responsibility. Both FQM and Barrick clearly distinguish between state and corporate roles:

“While governments have the primary duty for protecting human rights, we recognize that we must respect human rights within our sphere of influence. We also recognize that we have an important role to play in promoting human rights among our stakeholders.”
(FQM, 2024: 13)

This statement is repeated here as it clearly illustrates how corporate actors consistently construct a division between state obligation and corporate responsibility.

“While governments have the primary responsibility to protect against human rights violations, we understand and accept our responsibility to respect human rights.” (Barrick, 2024 b: 1)

This division of responsibility reflects the framework established in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which distinguish between the state duty to protect and the corporate responsibility to respect human rights (Human Rights Commission of Zambia, 2020: 9). While this framework formalises the separation of roles, it also reinforces a hierarchy of responsibility in which legal obligations are assigned to the state, while corporate responsibilities remain comparatively limited and non-binding. These statements construct a clear

boundary between “protection” and “respect,” assigning legal and structural responsibility to the state while limiting corporate responsibility to a narrower, non-binding domain. This highlights a clear distinction between how the state and corporate actors frame responsibility. While the state is positioned as the primary duty bearer with formal legal obligations, corporate actors frame their responsibilities as voluntary, limited, and embedded within broader narratives of development. This distinction also reflects the theoretical discussion in section 3.3, where the division between state obligations and corporate responsibility is conceptualised through the “protect” and “respect” framework, often characterised by its non-binding and voluntary nature.

The repeated reference to a “sphere of influence” further constrains corporate accountability, suggesting that responsibility is conditional and context-dependent. This also reflects what Snow et al. (1986) describe as frame alignment, where corporate actors construct responsibility in ways that resonate with broader governance frameworks, particularly the UNGP distinction between “protect” and “respect.” This division is also reflected in underlying assumptions about governance and development. Corporate actors explicitly reject the role of the state:

“One position on which we are clear is that we are not the government. While we invest in essential infrastructure such as healthcare, education and water access to kickstart development, we do not and will not assume the responsibilities of the state, and we make it clear that governments must be accountable for protecting and upholding human rights. From security to fundamental human rights, we always fulfil our responsibility to respect human rights and defer to government to bear the primary duty to protect them.” (Barrick, 2024 a: 56)

At the same time, they emphasise partnerships and capacity-building:

“Building strong stakeholder relationships, particularly with host governments, where we work to augment government capabilities through capacity-building, is fundamental to our business success.”
(FQM, 2024: 12)

This suggests an implicit assumption that while the state is formally responsible for human rights protection, it requires support from corporate actors to fulfil this role. Responsibility is therefore not only divided but also reconfigured through collaborative arrangements, where corporate involvement is framed as necessary but not accountable in the same way as state action. This configuration is closely linked to the structural conditions outlined in sections 3.1 and 3.2, where Zambia’s historical dependence on extractive industries and continued reliance on foreign investment shape the allocation of responsibility. Within this context, limiting corporate obligations while maintaining investor participation becomes a politically and economically rational strategy.

From a WPR perspective, these representations are underpinned by several key assumptions. First, that the state has primary responsibility for human rights protection, even in contexts of limited capacity. Second, that corporate actors operate within a separate and less binding framework of “respect,” rather than legal obligation. Third, that economic development and human rights protection are mutually reinforcing, rather than potentially conflicting. These assumptions normalise a distribution of responsibility in which corporate accountability remains limited, while structural challenges related to governance and power asymmetries are backgrounded.

Taken together, the analysis shows that responsibility for human rights is constructed through a hierarchical and differentiated framework, in which the state is positioned as the primary duty bearer, while corporations are framed as

responsible actors operating within voluntary and self-regulated boundaries. This distinction between “protect” and “respect” constitutes a central organising principle in the discourse, shaping how responsibility is understood, distributed, and legitimised within Zambia’s mining sector. However, this distribution of responsibility also raises questions about what remains unaddressed within these constructions. In particular, it becomes relevant to examine which issues, actors, and power relations are rendered invisible, taken for granted, or depoliticised within the discourse. The following section therefore shifts focus to the silences and exclusions that underpin and sustain this particular configuration of responsibility.

6.3 Identifying silences and exclusions in responsibility discourse

This section examines what is left unproblematic or silent within the construction of responsibility in Zambian mining discourse. Building on the analysis in sections 6.1 and 6.2, the focus here is not on what is explicitly articulated, but on what is rendered invisible, marginalised, or depoliticised in the material. Drawing on WPR question 4, the analysis focuses on how certain issues, actors, and power relations are rendered silent or taken for granted within the material, shaping the limits of how responsibility can be understood and articulated. In line with CDA, particular attention is given to how absences, silences, and omissions function as part of discourse, shaping what can and cannot be articulated (Fairclough, 2013).

Across both policy and corporate discourse, issues of structural inequality and power asymmetries are consistently underemphasised. While inequality is occasionally acknowledged, it is framed in technical or economic terms rather than as a structural or political issue. For example, the 8NDP notes that inequality is assessed using standard economic indicators such as the Gini coefficient, a commonly used measure of income inequality ranging from perfect equality to maximum inequality:

“During the period under review, inequality in income, as measured by the Gini coefficient, worsened due to the fact that growth was driven by industries that were not labour intensive. This relegated most of the labour to low paying informal jobs. Further, productivity in the agriculture sector, which was the mainstay of the rural population, did not improve, resulting in stagnation of incomes” (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022 a: 15)

Similarly, policy documents highlight the limited participation of local populations in the mining value chain:

“The participation of the local people in the mining value chain has been considerably low due to various factors that include lack of capital, inadequate skills and lack of modern technology. This has been exacerbated by lack of guidelines on ownership” (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022 b: 5–6)

However, these issues are presented as challenges related to skills, capital, or productivity, rather than as outcomes of structural power relations between multinational corporations and local communities. In doing so, responsibility is implicitly shifted away from corporate actors and broader global economic structures, and instead located within local deficiencies. As such, inequality is depoliticised and reframed as a technical problem requiring economic solutions. While existing research highlights that human rights risks in extractive industries are structurally embedded rather than the result of isolated governance failures (Idemudia et al., 2022), the policy and corporate discourse analysed here reframes these issues as technical or managerial challenges. Corporate accountability is also systematically downplayed. In policy discourse, CSR, i.e. voluntary corporate

initiatives aimed at contributing to social and community development, is framed as an “aspiration” rather than an obligation:

“The current Corporate Social Responsibility mechanism in Zambia is based on the aspirations of the mining firms, hence there is inadequate stakeholder collaboration and participation of the local people in the development of projects for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).” (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022 b: 6)

This quotation is revisited here because it captures a recurring discursive pattern across both policy and corporate material, namely the construction of responsibility as voluntary and internally defined rather than externally imposed. The use of the term “aspirations” is particularly significant, as the word “aspirations” performs a discursive shift from obligation to intention. Rather than signalling duty, it invokes something future-oriented, optional, and internally defined. In contrast to legal or regulatory language, which implies duty and compliance, “aspirations” suggests intention rather than requirement. This wording therefore shifts responsibility away from formal accountability and towards discretionary corporate action, limiting the scope of what can be demanded or enforced. In line with Benford and Snow (2000), this can be seen as a form of framing that redefines responsibility in ways that limit demands for accountability, by transforming obligations into intentions. This discursive construction aligns with broader critiques in the business and human rights literature, where the UN Guiding Principles have been characterised as a form of “soft law,” lacking binding enforceability and relying on voluntary corporate commitment (Joseph and Kyriakakis, 2023; Assenza, 2025). Similarly, corporate actors explicitly reject binding responsibility, as illustrated by Barrick:

“One position on which we are clear is that we are not the government. While we invest in essential infrastructure such as healthcare, education and water access to kickstart development, we do not and will not assume the responsibilities of the state, and we make it clear that governments must be accountable for protecting and upholding human rights.” (Barrick, 2024 a: 56)

This quotation from Barrick is revisited here as it encapsulates the broader discursive boundary through which corporate actors delimit their responsibility. The repeated use of negation—“not the government,” “do not,” “will not”—is particularly significant. Here, negation does not simply describe a boundary but actively constructs it. Through these formulations, responsibility is not only declined but discursively displaced. It does not merely describe a division of roles, but actively constructs a boundary of responsibility in which corporate actors position themselves outside the realm of legal and structural accountability. In this way, responsibility is discursively displaced onto the state, even as corporations maintain a visible role in development. At the same time, responsibility is framed as an “ethical” choice rather than a binding obligation:

“We try to do the right thing at all times, whether or not anyone is watching, or because the law says we must. We treat our colleagues, third parties and local community members the way each of us would like to be treated. We accept our responsibility to our shareholders and all other stakeholders.” (Barrick, 2024 b: 13)

This quotation is repeated as it exemplifies the moralisation of responsibility within corporate discourse. The phrase “do the right thing” shifts responsibility from institutional obligation to individual morality. Responsibility becomes a matter of character rather than accountability. The emphasis on acting “whether or

not anyone is watching” further reinforces this framing, positioning responsibility as voluntary rather than enforceable. Together, these formulations shift responsibility away from institutional accountability and towards discretionary and value-based commitments. This renders corporate power and influence largely unproblematic within the discourse, while obscuring the structural conditions under which such power is exercised. This aligns with what Kemp and Owen (2022) describe as “organised irresponsibility,” where formal commitments to responsibility coexist with governance arrangements that diffuse and limit accountability.

At a broader level, the expansion of mining itself is not problematised. Instead, it is consistently framed as inherently beneficial and necessary, particularly in relation to global development and the energy transition. As FQM states:

“Mining is no longer simply an extractive industry. FQM seeks to contribute in a fair and sustainable manner to our host governments and communities as a responsible corporate citizen.” (FQM 2024: 3)

Similarly, policy documents describe mineral extraction as a “perfect opportunity” for national development:

“Therefore, the expected demand for critical minerals provides a perfect opportunity for the country to realise more benefits for its citizenry.” (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2024: 2)

These representations construct mining expansion as an unquestioned good, obscuring its potential social and environmental consequences. Even where negative impacts are acknowledged in supporting material, such as deforestation and displacement, these are framed as secondary effects rather than inherent

features of extractive development (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2024: 8).

The discourse also normalises Zambia's economic dependence on foreign investment and global markets. Policy documents emphasise the importance of maintaining investor confidence:

“Additionally, Zambia’s continued political stability will be cardinal for increased investment and enhanced socio-economic development. Policymakers will also be expected to commit to reviewing policies and laws that impede private sector participation to enhance its contribution to development.” (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022 a: 88)

Similarly, Zambia is positioned as a “reliable supplier” within global value chains (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2024: 2). While dependence on mining and foreign capital is acknowledged, it is framed as a neutral or necessary condition for development rather than as a structural vulnerability. Supporting material reinforces this dynamic, noting that mining plays a “disproportionately large role in the national economy” and that diversification efforts have had limited success (World Bank, 2023: 6).

From a postcolonial perspective, these silences reflect the reproduction of historically rooted structures of dependency, in which resource-rich states remain integrated into global capitalism through externally oriented extraction, as highlighted by Amin (2003) and Rodney (1981). The absence of critical engagement with these structural relations suggests that contemporary mining governance continues to operate within patterns consistent with what Nkrumah conceptualised as neo-colonialism, where formal sovereignty coexists with externally shaped economic constraints. Moreover, in line with Said's (1977) analysis of discourse and representation, the framing of mining, investment, and

development as necessary and beneficial can be understood as part of a broader system of representation that naturalises dependency and positions external actors as indispensable to development.

From a neo-Gramscian perspective, these silences can be interpreted as expressions of hegemonic normalisation processes, through which investor-led development and integration into global markets are presented as inevitable and rational policy choices (Cox, 1983; Gill, 1998). In this way, structural inequalities, corporate power, and dependency are not merely omitted but actively depoliticised, limiting the range of alternative policy imaginaries.

Taken together, the analysis demonstrates that key issues—including corporate accountability, structural inequality, and global power relations—are not only underemphasised but actively depoliticised. These silences play a crucial role in sustaining the dominant representation of mining-led development, limiting the range of possible problem formulations and reinforcing existing power structures. Importantly, these silences do not merely shape how issues are represented, but also have material and political consequences. By rendering certain problems invisible and others taken for granted, they influence how responsibility is enacted in practice. This raises the question of what effects these discursive constructions produce within governance arrangements and development processes. The following section therefore examines the concrete effects of these representations, focusing on how they shape responsibility allocation, institutional roles, and development outcomes.

6.4 Analysing the effects of responsibility under economic dependence

This section examines the effects produced by the dominant representations of responsibility identified in previous sections, as well as how these representations are maintained and reproduced under conditions of economic dependence. From a

framing perspective, these effects can be understood as the outcome of how particular problem definitions and responsibility allocations are constructed and stabilised through discourse (Entman, 1993). In line with Entman (1993), this involves not only defining problems, but also shaping causal interpretations and limiting the range of possible policy responses. Drawing on WPR questions 5 and 6, the analysis focuses on the practical consequences of how responsibility is constructed, and how these effects reinforce existing power relations and governance arrangements. Several quotations are revisited in this section to demonstrate how recurring discursive constructions of responsibility translate into practical governance effects under conditions of economic dependence. From a CDA perspective, these effects are understood as the outcome of how discourse structures social reality, shaping both governance practices and the distribution of responsibility.

A central effect of how responsibility is constructed through the division between state “protection” and corporate “respect” is the displacement of responsibility onto the state, even in contexts where state capacity is limited. At the same time, corporations are able to assume visible roles in development while explicitly rejecting binding accountability. As Barrick states:

“One position on which we are clear is that we are not the government. While we invest in essential infrastructure such as healthcare, education and water access to kickstart development, we do not and will not assume the responsibilities of the state, and we make it clear that governments must be accountable for protecting and upholding human rights. From security to fundamental human rights, we always fulfil our responsibility to respect human rights and defer to government to bear the primary duty to protect them.” (Barrick, 2024 a: 56)

This quotation is revisited here to illustrate not only how responsibility is defined, but how it produces concrete governance effects when enacted under conditions of limited state capacity. This statement does not merely describe a division of roles, but actively stabilises it. The phrase “not the government” functions as a boundary-making device that defines the limits of corporate responsibility while reaffirming the state as the primary duty bearer. Through this formulation, responsibility is discursively displaced onto the state, even as corporations simultaneously present themselves as key contributors to development. This dual positioning enables corporations to maintain legitimacy while avoiding binding accountability. Similarly, corporate responsibility is framed as an internal, ethical commitment rather than a legal obligation:

“At First Quantum, we are proud of our contribution to society: investing in mining the metals that build the modern world; deploying the technical and social capabilities of our people to add the most value we can; and improving the lives of people in the countries in which we operate. Our approach to responsible mining is guided by core values developed in the company’s formative years. We endeavor to take the right course of action because it is the right thing to do, and we encourage each of our employees to take responsibility for their own actions and those of their team.”
(FQM, 2024: 5)

Here, responsibility is constructed through a vocabulary of “contribution” and “core values,” shifting its meaning from external obligation to internal motivation. By emphasising that actions are taken because they are “the right thing to do,” responsibility is moralised and individualised, rather than institutionalised. This reduces the scope for enforceable accountability, as responsibility becomes dependent on corporate discretion rather than regulatory frameworks. At the

policy level, this logic is reinforced through the framing of corporate responsibility as aspirational:

“The current Corporate Social Responsibility mechanism in Zambia is based on the aspirations of the mining firms, hence there is inadequate stakeholder collaboration and participation of the local people in the development of projects for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).” (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2022 b: 6)

This quotation is repeated here to emphasise how the framing of responsibility as “aspirational” is not only a discursive construction, but also produces concrete effects by limiting the scope of enforceable accountability in practice. The term “aspirations” is particularly significant, as it signals intention rather than obligation and frames responsibility as voluntary and internally defined. Across these formulations, responsibility is consistently redefined through a shared vocabulary of “contribution,” “core values,” and “aspirations.” Rather than signalling obligation, these terms shift responsibility into the realm of intention and self-definition, limiting what can be demanded or enforced. In this way, both corporate and policy discourse converge in constructing corporate responsibility as voluntary, despite formally assigning legal responsibility to the state.

These representations produce a governance configuration characterised by a structural mismatch between responsibility and capacity. While the state is positioned as the primary duty bearer, it often lacks the institutional capacity to enforce human rights protections. At the same time, corporations play an increasingly central role in development provision, but remain largely outside formal accountability structures. This dynamic reflects broader critiques of the UN Guiding Principles, where corporate responsibility is framed as non-binding and dependent on voluntary compliance. In practice, this configuration also

reshapes the roles of state and corporate actors. Corporations are constructed as technical experts and development partners, while the state is positioned as a facilitator of investment. This reconfiguration simultaneously reinforces corporate legitimacy, shifts responsibility to the state, and prioritises investment imperatives over rights protection. As a result, governance becomes oriented toward maintaining economic stability rather than ensuring accountability. These dynamics are further reinforced by institutional constraints. Supporting material highlights how regulatory bodies such as the Zambia Environmental Management Agency (ZEMA) face significant resource limitations:

“ZEMA has inadequate resources to monitor ESIA preparation and implementation. Resource constraints also mean that ZEMA is largely unable to conduct field and even incisive desk reviews of mining license applications, implementation of license conditions or environmental and social regulations.” (World Bank, 2023: 15–16)

This illustrates how formal responsibility is undermined in practice, as limited capacity restricts the state’s ability to monitor and enforce regulations. At the same time, corporate actors play a central role in governance processes, including land access and community relations:

“Nevertheless, this process is largely managed by the proponent/mining company through consultations with local communities as represented by the Chief.” (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2024: 28)

Together, these arrangements produce a governance gap, in which responsibility is formally allocated to the state but operationally shifted toward corporate actors

without corresponding accountability. This governance gap is therefore not incidental, but a direct effect of how responsibility is discursively constructed and distributed between actors.

A further effect of these representations is the legitimisation of mining expansion as a necessary condition for development. Across both corporate and policy discourse, mining is consistently framed through a shared vocabulary of “opportunity,” “value,” and “progress,” positioning expansion as inherently beneficial. This framing performs a key discursive function: it defines mining not only as economically necessary, but as socially desirable, thereby limiting the space for critique. In this sense, framing not only shapes how issues are understood, but also what kinds of governance outcomes become possible. This effect is closely linked to how responsibility is framed, as the prioritisation of development limits the extent to which corporate accountability can be articulated. By consistently associating mining with development, alternative framings—such as risk, harm, or structural inequality—are marginalised. Even where negative impacts are acknowledged, they are not integrated into the core problem representation:

“Given mining’s importance to the Zambian economy and plans for expansion, there is a significant risk of further mining-induced deforestation, including in areas of pristine forest and important forest values. This risk is exacerbated by the fact that the legal and institutional regime for mineral sector governance does not provide sufficient safeguards for the conservation of forests and their diverse value.” (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2024: 6)

Despite such evidence, mining expansion itself is not problematised. This reinforces the dominant problem representation identified in section 6.1, where

mining-led development is constructed as necessary, thereby limiting the visibility of alternative development pathways.

These representations also contribute to the reproduction of economic dependency. Policy discourse emphasises the importance of maintaining investor confidence and positioning Zambia within global value chains:

“Zambia's mineral resources, together with the country's policy and legal framework, positions the country globally as a secure, reliable, and ethical supplier of these critical minerals.”
(Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2024: 2)

This reflects how economic dependency structures governance priorities, as attracting and retaining investment constrains the scope of regulatory intervention. Supporting material further highlights the continued dominance of mining within the economy:

“Mining plays a disproportionately large role in the national economy; efforts over the years to diversify the economy have had limited impact.” (World Bank, 2023: 6)

Together, these dynamics reinforce a governance model oriented toward investor stability and export-led growth, limiting policy autonomy and the scope for regulatory change. In this sense, economic dependency does not only constrain policy choices, but also shapes how responsibility is constructed and what forms of accountability are considered feasible.

Finally, these representations contribute to the narrowing of policy alternatives. By framing mining-led development as necessary and inevitable, alternative approaches to development, regulation, and human rights protection are

marginalised. In practice, this is reflected in the reliance on technical tools such as ESIAAs:

“[However,] the current implementation of ESIAAs in Zambia is not geared towards identifying and addressing human rights impacts.”
(Human Rights Commission of Zambia, 2020: 6)

This demonstrates how technical regulatory tools are used to address complex human rights issues, reinforcing a governance logic in which procedural compliance substitutes for substantive accountability. These effects are not isolated, but mutually reinforcing, linking problem representations, responsibility allocation, and discursive silences into a coherent system. From a neo-Gramscian perspective, this reflects a broader hegemonic stabilisation, in which investor-led development and market-oriented governance are normalised as “common sense” within policy and corporate discourse (Cox, 1983; Gill, 1998). In this way, these discursive constructions do not merely reflect economic dependency, but actively reproduce and stabilise it by shaping what is perceived as economically rational and politically feasible. The recurrence of this framing is analytically significant, as it indicates how particular assumptions about development become taken for granted, thereby limiting the scope of political contestation and alternative policy options.

Read through a postcolonial lens, these dynamics reflect the persistence of historically rooted structures of dependency, in which Zambia’s integration into global capitalism continues to follow patterns established during colonial extraction. These patterns reflect not only contemporary governance arrangements, but the enduring legacy of colonial economic structures. As highlighted by Amin (2003) and Rodney (1981), resource-rich states remain integrated into global capitalism through externally oriented extraction. These historical trajectories shape contemporary development pathways, limiting the

extent to which alternative economic models can emerge. The positioning of Zambia as a “reliable supplier” reinforces a global division of labour in which value is oriented toward external markets, while domestic policy space remains constrained. Taken together, a postcolonial perspective highlights how these dynamics are rooted in historically produced structures of dependency, while a neo-Gramscian perspective explains how they are actively reproduced and stabilised within contemporary governance through discourse and institutional arrangements. Responsibility is displaced onto the state despite limited capacity, corporate actors are legitimised as development partners while remaining weakly accountable, and economic dependency is simultaneously reproduced through the prioritisation of investment. In this sense, responsibility is not simply distributed between actors, but constructed in ways that produce specific governance effects under conditions of economic dependence. These findings illustrate how the problem representations (6.1), responsibility allocations (6.2), and discursive silences (6.3) operate together to stabilise a governance arrangement in which accountability remains limited. This highlights the need to consider these elements not as separate analytical steps, but as part of a broader discursive formation. The final section therefore synthesises these insights in order to bring the analysis together and reflect on their broader implications for how responsibility and development are understood within Zambia’s mining sector.

6.5 Bringing together problem representations, responsibility, silences, and effects in mining governance

Building on the preceding analysis, this section brings together the key findings to reflect on how responsibility for human rights is constructed, limited, and sustained within Zambia’s mining sector. By tracing the connections between problem representation (6.1), the allocation of responsibility (6.2), discursive

silences (6.3), and their effects (6.4), it becomes possible to understand how these elements operate as part of a coherent discursive formation.

Taken together, the analysis shows that these dimensions are not separate analytical steps, but mutually reinforcing processes. The framing of underdevelopment as the central “problem” establishes the conditions under which mining expansion is positioned as necessary, while human rights concerns are backgrounded. Within this framing, responsibility is subsequently distributed in a way that prioritises state obligation while constructing corporate responsibility as voluntary, limited, and non-binding. This configuration is further sustained through discursive silences, in which structural inequalities, power asymmetries, and corporate accountability are depoliticised or rendered invisible. These silences, in turn, enable and legitimise the effects identified in section 6.4, including the displacement of responsibility onto the state, the reinforcement of corporate legitimacy, and the prioritisation of investment imperatives over rights protection.

Importantly, these elements operate in a circular and self-reinforcing manner. The way the problem is represented constrains how responsibility can be allocated, while this allocation depends on the exclusion of alternative perspectives and critiques. At the same time, the effects produced by these representations contribute to reproducing the initial framing of mining as a necessary pathway for development. In this way, responsibility is not simply distributed between actors, but continuously negotiated and stabilised within a broader discursive and structural context shaped by economic dependence. This suggests that the observed patterns of responsibility are not incidental, but embedded within a governance logic that both reflects and reinforces existing power relations.

Within this broader configuration, a central pattern becomes particularly visible: a discursive misalignment between corporate and state constructions of responsibility. While corporations explicitly shift responsibility onto the state through the language of legal obligation, policy discourse simultaneously relies on

corporate actors to deliver development outcomes and social goods. Rather than producing a complementary division of labour, these constructions result in a mutual displacement of responsibility. Corporations defer to the state's duty to protect, while the state implicitly depends on voluntary corporate initiatives to address social and developmental needs. The result is not a clear or stable allocation of responsibility, but a fragmented and uneven configuration in which key obligations remain unfulfilled. From a framing perspective, this illustrates how responsibility is actively constructed through competing yet mutually reinforcing discourses that define what is seen as appropriate, legitimate, and feasible.

Ultimately, these findings show that responsibility for human rights in Zambia's mining sector is not simply divided between state and corporate actors, but is produced through the interaction of structural dependency, hegemonic power relations, and discursive framing. The observed accountability gap is therefore not incidental, but structurally and discursively produced, reflecting a governance arrangement in which responsibility is formally assigned but practically diffused.

7 Conclusions: Human rights responsibility in Zambia's mining sector

This chapter concludes the study by synthesising and interpreting the main findings in relation to the research questions and overall aim. It reflects on how human rights responsibility is constructed, negotiated, and constrained within Zambia's mining sector under conditions of economic dependence, drawing on the key findings generated in the analysis.

The first section summarises the central findings, with a particular focus on the relationship between responsibility, power, and accountability. The second section outlines potential avenues for future research, building on the analytical and empirical limitations of the study. The final section reflects on methodological and analytical limitations, discussing the implications of the chosen research design and approach.

7.1 Construction and Displacement of Responsibility in Zambia's Mining Sector

This study set out to examine how responsibility for human rights is constructed in Zambia's mining sector under conditions of economic dependence. The thesis set out to answer four questions:

Main research question:

How do the Zambian state and foreign mining companies construct and negotiate human rights responsibilities in Zambia's mining sector under conditions of economic dependence?

Sub-questions:

1. How does the *Zambian* state frame its obligations to protect human rights within its mining policies and regulatory frameworks?
2. How do foreign mining companies frame their responsibilities and legitimacy in *Zambia*, and how are tensions between economic imperatives and human rights addressed in their discourse?
3. How do state and corporate discourses on human rights reflect and reproduce broader global power asymmetries embedded in relationships between multinational corporations and economically dependent states?

The analysis demonstrates that responsibility is not clearly defined or shared between actors, but rather contested, fragmented, and ultimately displaced through discourse. A central finding is that human rights are not constructed as a primary problem within mining governance, but are instead embedded within broader narratives of economic development and good governance. Here underdevelopment is framed as the central challenge and mining expansion as the primary solution. This framing has important implications for how responsibility is understood, as it limits the extent to which human rights can be articulated as a distinct and urgent governance issue.

The analysis further demonstrates that both corporate and state actors construct responsibility in ways that appear complementary, but in practice produce a significant accountability gap. Corporate actors explicitly position the state as the primary duty bearer. As repeatedly stated in corporate reports, “governments have the primary duty for protecting human rights,” while companies limit their own role to respecting human rights within a defined “sphere of influence.” Similarly, Barrick emphasises that “we are not the government” and that governments must remain accountable for “protecting and upholding human rights.” These formulations do not merely describe a division of roles, but actively work to delimit corporate responsibility, framing it as secondary, conditional, and ultimately non-binding. At the same time, corporate discourse constructs responsibility as voluntary and value-driven rather than legally enforceable. Phrases such as “we try to do the right thing” and references to “core values” shift

responsibility into the realm of ethics rather than obligation, presenting it as discretionary rather than binding. In doing so, corporate actors retain legitimacy as development partners while avoiding binding accountability. Responsibility becomes something internally defined and selectively enacted, rather than externally imposed and enforceable. In this way, corporate responsibility is systematically reduced to compliance and moral self-regulation, rather than treated as a matter of enforceable accountability. From a neo-Gramscian perspective, this construction of responsibility reflects a broader hegemonic configuration in which voluntary corporate responsibility and investor-led development are normalised as common sense. Within this framework, stronger regulatory demands on corporate actors appear politically and economically difficult to pursue, as they risk undermining investment stability. As a result, the limitation of corporate responsibility does not emerge as problematic, but as a rational and necessary feature of governance under conditions of economic dependence. This also shows how corporations frame their responsibilities in ways that reconcile economic imperatives with human rights concerns, by presenting responsibility as voluntary and internally managed rather than as a binding constraint on business operations.

On the other hand, Zambian policy discourse presents a somewhat different, yet equally problematic, construction of responsibility. While the state is formally positioned as the primary duty bearer within governance frameworks, policy documents simultaneously emphasise the role of mining companies in driving development and delivering social benefits. Corporate social responsibility is framed as central to community development, even though it is described as being based on the “aspirations of the mining firms.” This suggests an implicit expectation that corporations will take on developmental and social responsibilities that extend beyond their formal obligations, despite the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms. From a postcolonial perspective, this dynamic reflects broader structures of dependency rooted in colonial and neo-colonial relations, in which formally sovereign states remain reliant on external actors for

development. In line with Nkrumah's concept of neo-colonialism, the state retains formal responsibility but operates within structurally constrained conditions shaped by foreign investment and global capital, thereby reinforcing the role of multinational corporations as key agents of development. In this way, the state frames its obligations as legally primary, while simultaneously positioning corporate actors as necessary partners in fulfilling development and social functions.

This dynamic is further exacerbated by the state's limited institutional capacity, as highlighted in the analysis. While responsibility is formally assigned to the state, its ability to enforce human rights protections is constrained by resource limitations and dependence on foreign investment. In this context, the corporate emphasis on voluntary responsibility becomes particularly significant, as it effectively limits the scope of enforceable accountability precisely where it is most needed. At the same time, this configuration reflects broader structural and discursive constraints, in which strong regulatory demands on corporate actors become difficult to articulate as they risk conflicting with the imperative to attract and maintain investment. The observed distribution of responsibility is therefore not only a matter of institutional design, but also a product of discursive and structural conditions shaped by economic dependence. These discursive constructions therefore reflect and reproduce broader global power asymmetries, in which economically dependent states operate within constraints shaped by foreign capital and multinational corporate power.

At the same time, the analysis shows that mining expansion itself is not problematised within the material, but is consistently constructed as a necessary and beneficial pathway to development. By framing mining as an "opportunity" and a driver of progress, alternative perspectives—such as those emphasising risk, harm, or structural inequality—are marginalised. These representations contribute to the normalisation of extractive development and limit the visibility of alternative development trajectories. In this sense, the framing of mining not only defines the problem but also constrains the range of conceivable solutions.

At the outset of this study, I expected to find a degree of displacement of responsibility for human rights, but not to the extent revealed in the analysis. Given Zambia's strong economic reliance on mining, I anticipated that the state would be constrained in asserting strict regulatory control over the sector. However, I also expected that this reliance would translate into stronger expectations placed on mining companies, particularly in relation to labour conditions and community welfare, as they are the primary beneficiaries of resource extraction. What emerged instead was a more pronounced imbalance. Mining companies were not only limited in their acceptance of responsibility, but actively articulated clear boundaries around it. Statements such as "we are not the government" illustrate a deliberate distancing from binding accountability, while responsibility is simultaneously reframed as voluntary contribution to development. What is particularly striking is that corporate actors openly construct their responsibility primarily in terms of development contributions, rather than in relation to immediate and enforceable human rights obligations. While certain aspects of human rights are implicitly addressed through development initiatives, others—such as labour conditions, accountability, and rights protection in the present—are notably backgrounded or absent. Rather than being pressured to compensate for weak state capacity, corporate actors were largely legitimised within the discourse as development partners, with limited scrutiny of their obligations. This finding challenges the assumption that economic dependence necessarily leads to increased demands on corporate responsibility, and instead highlights how such dependence may contribute to its dilution.

Overall, the study shows that responsibility is not only constructed through discourse, but also negotiated between actors and structurally constrained by conditions of economic dependence. This study therefore demonstrates that the accountability gap is not incidental, but structurally and discursively produced. This suggests that human rights challenges in the sector cannot be addressed solely through institutional reform or capacity-building, as the underlying issue

lies in how responsibility itself is constructed, negotiated, and limited. Addressing these challenges therefore requires not only regulatory change, but a fundamental rethinking of the discursive and structural conditions that shape responsibility under economic dependence.

7.2 Reflecting on limitations and future research

Conducting this study reshaped my understanding of responsibility in extractive industries. While I was aware of the structural challenges and documented human rights issues within the mining sector, I did not anticipate the extent to which responsibility would be diffused across actors. The analysis suggests that responsibility is not merely weak or insufficiently enforced, but structured in ways that disperse accountability, leaving affected communities with limited avenues through which to claim or enforce their rights.

This also highlighted a key methodological limitation: the potential “flatness” of a document-based analysis. By relying on policy documents and corporate reports, the study captures how responsibility is formally articulated, but not how it is contested, negotiated, or experienced in practice. While this provides insight into dominant institutional discourses, it offers more limited access to lived realities and informal practices. This limitation became particularly apparent in relation to prior field experience in Zambia, where corporate development initiatives contrasted sharply with workers’ experiences of economic insecurity. Incorporating perspectives from workers, local communities, and civil society actors more explicitly could therefore have strengthened the analysis by grounding discursive findings in lived realities. Future research could address this limitation through interview-based approaches examining how responsibility is enacted, interpreted, and contested by different actors within the mining sector.

These reflections are closely tied to the study’s methodological choices. The qualitative discourse-analytical approach enables a detailed examination of how responsibility, power, and legitimacy are articulated in policy and corporate texts.

However, the reliance on document-based analysis means that the study primarily reflects institutional perspectives. While interviews with corporate representatives, policymakers, affected communities, or workers could have provided additional empirical depth, such approaches also present practical and methodological challenges, including restricted access and strategically framed responses. The reliance on document analysis therefore reflects a deliberate methodological choice to focus on publicly articulated and institutionalised forms of discourse, even if this limits insight into informal practices and lived experiences.

Alternative methodological approaches were also considered but presented their own constraints. Comparative studies could have offered broader insights, yet identifying a truly comparable case proved difficult given Zambia's specific political-economic context and the dominant role of mining in the national economy. For example, the Democratic Republic of Congo is often used as a point of comparison, but its political and institutional context differs significantly, raising questions about the validity of direct comparison. Similarly, comparing mining to other industries within Zambia would not capture the same structural dynamics, given the sector's dominant role in the national economy. Nevertheless, future comparative research could examine whether similar patterns of responsibility construction and accountability gaps emerge in other resource-dependent contexts. Media analysis was also limited by the lack of accessible digital archives in Zambia. The study therefore deliberately focuses on a single case and a discourse-analytical approach in order to situate texts within their broader political-economic context.

Further limitations relate to the scope of the study. The single case study design limits generalisability, while the temporal focus on documents from 2019–2025 captures a particular discursive moment rather than longer historical developments. In addition, the discourse-analytical approach prioritises representations and meaning-making over the analysis of specific empirical events. Finally, the interpretive nature of CDA and the WPR approach entails a

degree of analytical subjectivity, meaning that alternative interpretations remain possible despite efforts toward reflexivity and transparency.

Taken together, these limitations reflect the trade-offs inherent in a qualitative discourse-analytical approach. While the study provides insight into how responsibility is constructed, legitimised, and constrained within dominant institutional discourse, it does not fully capture how these constructions are enacted or contested in practice. Future research could therefore benefit from combining discourse analysis with interviews, comparative approaches, or alternative governance perspectives in order to develop a more multidimensional understanding of responsibility within extractive industries.

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9 Appendix

9.1 Empirical References

9.1.1 Zambian policy and regulatory documents

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