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Corporate Social Responsibility in Zambia's Mining Host Communities: Measurable Local Development Outcomes or Primarily Reputational Value?

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Abstract

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is widely promoted in Zambia's mining sector as a pathway to shared value for mine host communities, yet it remains contested whether CSR produces measurable local development outcomes or functions mainly as reputational and risk management. This PRISMA-informed systematic review synthesises evidence published between 2015 and 2025 and assesses two outcome pathways: (1) observable local development changes (for example, health, livelihoods, infrastructure, and service access) and (2) reputational value (for example, legitimacy, social licence, disclosure performance, and conflict management). Across the reviewed literature, CSR is frequently framed and operationalised as a tool for managing operational and reputational risks, which can narrow the development ambition of CSR activities and bias benefits toward risk hotspots rather than greatest need (Frederiksen, 2018; Phiri *et al.*, 2019) ^[9, 16]. Quantitative

studies from a large-scale copper mining area in Northwestern Zambia provide evidence of improvements in selected health and household wealth indicators over time, but attribution to CSR alone is typically indirect because mine-area effects operate through multiple channels (Knoblauch *et al.*, 2020; Zabré *et al.*, 2021; Farnham *et al.*, 2022) ^[12, 17, 7]. Evidence on reputational returns is more explicit, including work linking CSR disclosure to reputation and performance outcomes (Ndemena, 2023) ^[14]. Overall, the literature suggests mixed and context-dependent development results, with stronger and more consistent support for CSR's legitimacy and conflict-mitigation functions than for sustained, independently verified local development impact. The review concludes with practical recommendations for outcome-based CSR governance and a Zambia-specific research agenda to strengthen attribution and transparency.

Keywords: Corporate Social Responsibility, Mining, Zambia, Host Communities, Local Development Outcomes, Reputation, Social Licence to Operate, Conflict

1. Introduction

Mining host communities in Zambia sit at the centre of a long-running debate about what corporate social responsibility (CSR) achieves in practice. Mining companies commonly present CSR as a contribution to local development through investments in health, education, water and sanitation, roads, youth skills, and livelihoods. At the same time, researchers and community stakeholders question whether these initiatives translate into sustained development gains, or whether CSR functions mainly as reputational insurance that supports operational continuity and the firm's social licence to operate (Bice *et al.*, 2017; Frederiksen, 2018) ^[3, 9]. This debate matters because CSR is one of the most visible interfaces between mines and surrounding communities, particularly in contexts where public services are stretched and expectations of mining-led prosperity are high. This review distinguishes two outcome domains. First, measurable local development outcomes are defined as observable changes in wellbeing or service access that are plausibly linked to CSR-supported interventions. Second, reputational value refers to legitimacy, trust, acceptance, and reduced conflict risk, including how CSR is communicated through disclosure and engagement. The aim is to assess the balance of evidence across these domains in Zambia's mining host communities. The review is guided by four questions: (1) What CSR activities and investment areas are most commonly reported in Zambia's mining host communities? (2) What measurable local development outcomes are reported, what indicators are used, and how strong are the designs for assessing change and attribution? (3) What forms of reputational value are evidenced and how are they assessed? (4) What governance and contextual factors explain when CSR aligns with development outcomes versus when it functions mainly as reputational strategy?

2. Methods

2.1 Design and reporting approach

This study is a PRISMA-informed systematic review of literature on CSR in Zambia's mining host communities, focused on whether CSR is associated with measurable local development outcomes or primarily reputational value. The review follows PRISMA 2020 guidance for transparent reporting of searching and selection processes (Page *et al.*, 2021) ^[15]. Given heterogeneity in CSR definitions, interventions, and outcomes, synthesis was conducted as a structured narrative synthesis, reported in line with SWiM guidance where meta-analysis is not appropriate (Campbell *et al.*, 2020) ^[14].

2.2 Eligibility criteria

Eligibility criteria were defined using a Population-Exposure-Outcomes-Study design structure.

a. Population and setting:

Mining host communities in Zambia (including Copperbelt and North-Western Province).

b. Exposure:

CSR activities, social investments, community development projects funded or implemented by mining companies, and CSR disclosure linked to mining operations.

c. Outcomes:

Local development outcomes (health, livelihoods, education, WASH, infrastructure, welfare and wealth proxies).

Reputational outcomes (legitimacy, social licence, trust, conflict mitigation, disclosure performance).

d. Study types:

Empirical peer-reviewed studies (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods) and selected high-quality reports with clear methods.

e. Timeframe and language:

Publications from 1 January 2015 to 15 December 2025; English language.

2.3 Information sources and search strategy

Searches were conducted using open-access academic search interfaces and publisher platforms, together with targeted organisational repositories and journal checks. Sources included Google Scholar (web interface), ScienceDirect, publisher and institutional repositories, and targeted sites for Zambia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (ZEITI) and EITI disclosures. Targeted journal checks were conducted for Zambia-focused CSR disclosure work, including Austin Journal of Business Administration and Management (Ndemena, 2023) ^[14]. Search strings combined CSR terms, mining terms, Zambia location terms, and outcome terms (Appendix A). Reference lists of

included papers were also screened.

2.4 Screening and selection process

Screening occurred in two stages: title and abstract screening followed by full-text screening where available. Because the search relied on open web interfaces and iterative snowballing across sources, comprehensive database export counts were not consistently available. The review therefore reports the included evidence set transparently and notes the absence of complete PRISMA counts as a limitation.

2.5 Data extraction and coding

A structured extraction form captured bibliographic details, mine and community setting, CSR type, study design, indicators used, outcome domain(s) assessed, and key findings. Extracted studies were coded into (1) development outcome evidence, (2) reputational outcome evidence, or (3) both (Appendix B).

2.6 Quality appraisal

Given mixed methods in CSR research, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) 2018 was selected to appraise methodological quality across designs (Hong *et al.*, 2018) ^[10]. Where full texts were available, appraisal focused on clarity of research questions, appropriateness of design, transparency of sampling and measures, and coherence between data and conclusions. Appraisal informed confidence in findings during synthesis rather than automatic exclusion.

2.7 Synthesis

Evidence was synthesised in three layers: (1) descriptive mapping of CSR themes and study locations; (2) outcome synthesis by domain (development outcomes and reputational outcomes); and (3) identification of moderators such as governance arrangements, participation design, and disclosure practices.

3. Results

3.1 Included evidence

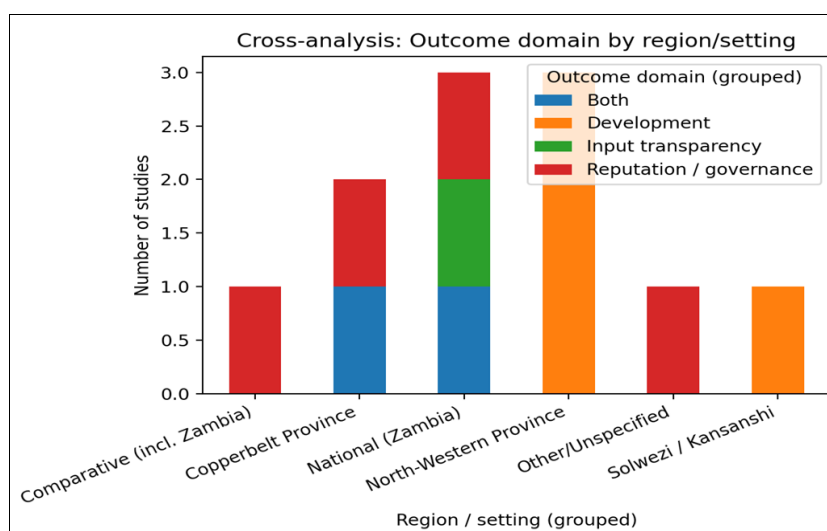
The final synthesis included a focused set of Zambia-relevant empirical studies and reports published between 2015 and 2025. Included works clustered in two regions: Copperbelt and North-Western Province. Quantitative evidence was concentrated around a large copper mine development area in North-Western Zambia, while stakeholder and governance analyses were more common in Copperbelt contexts.

3.2 Characteristics of included studies

Table 1: Included evidence and focus areas (2015-2025)

Study	Region / setting	Design	CSR focus	Outcome domain
Knoblauch <i>et al.</i> (2020) ^[12]	North-Western Zambia (copper mine area)	Repeated cross-sectional surveys	Health-related interventions and mine-area change	Development
Zabré <i>et al.</i> (2021) ^[17]	North-Western Zambia (copper mine area)	Difference-in-differences using wealth index	Mine-area socioeconomic change	Development
Farnham <i>et al.</i> (2022) ^[7]	North-Western Zambia (copper mine area)	Cross-sectional analysis (mobility/resettlement)	Mobility, employment, wellbeing and health	Development (distribution)
Phiri <i>et al.</i> (2019) ^[16]	Copperbelt (copper mining sector)	Qualitative interviews	Stakeholder power dynamics shaping CSR	Reputation / governance
Frederiksen (2018) ^[9]	Mining sector (global framing, applied to extractives)	Conceptual and empirical synthesis	CSR as risk and development	Reputation / governance
Frederiksen (2017) ^[8]	Comparative (incl. Zambia)	Political economy working paper	CSR and political settlements	Reputation / governance
Elorza & Verma (2019) ^[6]	Zambia copper mines	Desk-based review	CSR health claims and barriers	Both (claims vs outcomes)
Kourouma <i>et al.</i> (2023) ^[13]	Chingola District (Copperbelt)	Case study (community-centred assessment)	Social sustainability metrics	Both
Abel & Chibomba (2025) ^[1]	Solwezi District (Kansanshi)	Case study (survey/interviews)	CSR and community health	Development (perceptions)
Ndemena (2023) ^[14]	Zambia mining companies	Survey and document analysis	CSR disclosure and performance	Reputation
ZEITI (2025) ^[18]	National (Zambia)	EITI reporting	Voluntary social payments disclosure	Input transparency

Cross analysis of outcome domain by setting

**Fig 1:** Included evidence and focus areas

3.3 Evidence for measurable local development outcomes

Quantitative evidence from North-Western Zambia reports improvements in selected health and socioeconomic indicators in mine-impacted areas over time. Knoblauch *et al.* (2020) ^[12] reported better outcomes in impacted communities compared with comparison communities for several health indicators, while noting possible inequalities. Zabré *et al.* (2021) ^[17] found that mean household wealth increased substantially over time in mine-proximate communities and increased faster than in comparison communities in a difference-in-differences analysis. Farnham *et al.* (2022) ^[7] showed that migrants and resettled households had higher employment and wealth indicators, and that some child health outcomes differed by mobility status, highlighting distributional effects. Evidence labelled explicitly as CSR, rather than mine-area change, is more often based on case study perceptions. For

example, Abel and Chibomba (2025) ^[1] reported that CSR initiatives at Kansanshi were perceived to influence community health, but also documented dissatisfaction and called for greater community participation in CSR decision-making.

3.4 Evidence for reputational value and legitimacy outcomes

Zambia-focused CSR studies commonly emphasise legitimacy and stakeholder management. Phiri *et al.* (2019) ^[16] show CSR practices as shaped by stakeholder interactions and power dynamics in the copper sector, suggesting CSR decisions may prioritise stability and acceptance over community-defined development needs. Frederiksen (2018) ^[9] similarly frames CSR as linked to risk management and development narratives, which helps explain why CSR can favour visible projects and short time

horizons. Disclosure-focused work also treats CSR as a corporate performance and reputation signal; for example, Ndemena (2023) ^[14] examined CSR disclosure in relation to reputation and performance outcomes.

National transparency reporting further supports the view that CSR is discretionary and variable. According to ZEITI, Zambia does not require social payments through law or contract; reported social payments are voluntary and disclosed by companies via the EITI process (Zambia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, 2025) ^[18].

3.5 Synthesis of the balance of evidence

Across the evidence base, measurable improvements are most clearly documented where structured monitoring exists and where studies track outcomes over time. However, these studies generally evaluate mine-area effects rather than isolating CSR as a separate causal input. In contrast, CSR-labelled studies more consistently document reputational and legitimacy functions, including disclosure, stakeholder negotiation, and conflict management. Overall, the literature supports a mixed conclusion: CSR can contribute to development improvements in specific contexts, but the strongest and most consistent evidence is for reputational and risk-related returns.

4. Discussion

4.1 Interpreting CSR as development versus reputation

The review suggests that CSR in Zambia's mining host communities operates as a dual-outcome system. Mine-area studies provide evidence of improvements in health and wealth indicators, yet they rarely isolate CSR effects from employment, migration, resettlement, and public or project-linked services. This means that many development gains attributed to CSR may reflect broader mine-led change rather than CSR investments alone (Knoblauch *et al.*, 2020; Zabré *et al.*, 2021; Farnham *et al.*, 2022) ^[12, 17, 7]. By contrast, stakeholder and disclosure studies offer clearer evidence that CSR is used to build legitimacy, manage relationships, and protect social licence, which are real corporate returns even when development impact is mixed (Phiri *et al.*, 2019; Frederiksen, 2018; Ndemena, 2023) ^[16, 9, 14].

4.2 Why CSR impact is difficult to verify

Four factors repeatedly limit strong claims about CSR-driven development impact in Zambia: weak attribution designs; incentives toward visible projects and short time horizons; governance and participation gaps; and inconsistent input and outcome reporting. The voluntary character of CSR social payments, documented in EITI reporting, contributes to variability in scope and evaluation across companies and sites (Zambia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, 2025) ^[18].

4.3 Implications for theory and practice

For CSR theory in extractives, the Zambia evidence supports treating development outcomes and reputational outcomes as distinct but interacting domains. For practice, CSR portfolios should be managed with baselines, targets, and timeframes, and reported using outcome indicators rather than project lists. Shared decision-making structures and credible grievance systems are likely to improve both legitimacy and development performance.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The evidence from 2015-2025 indicates that CSR in Zambia's mining host communities is associated with measurable improvements in some contexts, especially where structured monitoring exists. However, most measurable outcome evidence reflects mine-area change rather than CSR-attributable impact. CSR-labelled studies more consistently support CSR's reputational and legitimacy functions. A balanced conclusion is therefore warranted: CSR can support development outcomes, but reputational value and risk management are more consistently evidenced as primary returns.

Recommendations for mining companies, regulators, and stakeholders include the following:

1. Adopt outcome-based CSR reporting with baselines, targets, and timeframes.
2. Separate development objectives from legitimacy objectives at design stage and measure both.
3. Strengthen community participation rules and joint oversight structures for CSR priority-setting.
4. Commission independent evaluation for high-value CSR programmes using quasi-experimental designs where feasible.
5. Link disclosed CSR payments to project portfolios and outcome indicators to improve traceability.

6. Limitations

This review is limited by weak attribution in most of the Zambia focused CSR evidence and by concentration of quantitative outcome studies in one large North-Western Zambia project setting. In addition, CSR reporting and disclosure are not standardised across companies and years, which limits comparability. Finally, because the search relied on open web interfaces and iterative snowballing across sources, comprehensive database export counts were not consistently available and complete PRISMA flow counts could not be reported.

7. Future Research Agenda

Future Zambia-focused CSR research should prioritise designs that can separate CSR inputs from wider mine-area change and measure development and reputational outcomes in the same studies. Recommended approaches include difference-in-differences and interrupted time series designs for specific CSR interventions, coupled with mixed-method process tracing on governance and participation design. Researchers should also improve spend-to-outcome traceability by linking disclosed CSR payments to project portfolios and district-level indicators, using ZEITI and company reporting as inputs.

Appendix A. Example search strings

("corporate social responsibility" OR CSR OR "social investment" OR "CSR disclosure" OR "community development") AND (mining OR mine OR copper OR "extractive industry") AND (Zambia OR Copperbelt OR Solwezi OR Chingola OR "North-Western Province" OR Kalumbila) AND (impact OR outcomes OR development OR health OR wealth OR livelihood OR education OR infrastructure OR reputation OR legitimacy OR "social licence" OR conflict).

Appendix B. Data extraction fields

1. Bibliographic details (author, year, outlet)
2. Setting (mine, district/province, host community)
3. CSR type (health, WASH, education, livelihoods, infrastructure, local content, disclosure)
4. Study design and methods
5. Outcome domain assessed (development, reputation, both)
6. Indicators used and direction of findings
7. Notes on equity and distribution
8. Key limitations relevant to attribution and bias

8. Conclusion

This systematic review assessed whether corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Zambia's mining host communities produces measurable local development outcomes or mainly generates reputational value. Overall, the evidence supports a mixed conclusion.

On the development side, the strongest empirical studies show measurable improvements in selected health and socioeconomic indicators in mine-affected areas over time, especially where there was structured monitoring and repeated community measurement (Knoblauch *et al.*, 2020; Zabré *et al.*, 2021) ^[12, 17]. However, these results generally reflect combined mine-area change rather than isolating CSR as a distinct, attributable cause. In most cases, CSR inputs are not mapped clearly enough to separate them from wages, migration, resettlement dynamics, and other project-linked investments (Farnham *et al.*, 2021; Zabré *et al.*, 2021 ^[17]).

On the reputational side, Zambia-focused CSR scholarship more consistently frames CSR as a mechanism for legitimacy, relationship management, and social licence, shaped by stakeholder power dynamics and the political and institutional context (Frederiksen, 2018; Phiri *et al.*, 2019) ^[9, 16]. Business-facing disclosure work also tends to operationalise CSR outcomes in terms of corporate reputation and performance rather than independently verified community development change (Ndemena, 2023) ^[14]. This is reinforced by the voluntary character of CSR social payments in Zambia's transparency reporting, which supports variability in scale, continuity, and evaluation across mines (Zambia Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative [ZEITI], 2025) ^[18].

The main implication is that CSR in Zambia's mining host communities appears more reliably evidenced as a reputational and risk-management instrument than as a consistently measured community development tool. Where measurable development gains exist, they are most credible when CSR is embedded in stronger governance arrangements, shared priority-setting, and long-term monitoring. For CSR to meet community development expectations more convincingly, future practice and research should strengthen traceability from CSR inputs to outcomes, adopt comparable outcome indicators, and use evaluation designs that can test contribution and distribution of benefits, not only project delivery (Page *et al.*, 2021; Zabré *et al.*, 2021) ^[15, 17].

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