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Black Gold, Lost Childhoods

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Black Gold, Lost Childhoods

How Poverty is Fueling Child Labour in Monze’s Charcoal Trade

By Emily Kuwema

Before sunrise, 14-year-old Alfred Habwaya* disappears into the thinning woodland of Chona Chiefdom in Monze district. His school uniform lies folded in an old bag, replaced by a sack and a machete. Each morning, he joins older men and women in feeding smouldering earth kilns that turn trees into charcoal, black gold in a community running out of options.

“I wanted to stay in school, but we sleep hungry if I don’t help make charcoal,” he says, his palms blackened with soot.

Across Southern Province, hundreds of children like Habwaya have quietly joined Zambia’s booming but illegal charcoal trade. What was once a side hustle for rural families has become a full-time lifeline, one that is devastating forests, derailing education, and defying the country’s own child labour laws.

Chief Choongo of the Tonga-speaking people can hardly hide his frustration.

“We have spoken about the effects of cutting trees, but the message has not been heard in some areas,” he says. “Children are suffering. They are packing and selling charcoal instead of going to school.”

In Monze, three chiefdoms, Choongo, Monze, and Hamusonde, have joined forces with authorities to combat the illegal charcoal trade. Their efforts include confiscating charcoal and plans to impound vehicles transporting the commodity.

“We struggle to find shade and even honey because big trees are finished. Wildlife has disappeared. Even rabbits are now rare,” one resident laments.

But the measures taken by traditional leaders and community monitors have done little to stem the crisis.

In February 2025, Habwaya left school in Grade Six. With his father unemployed and his mother trading vegetables occasionally, the burden of survival now rests on his young shoulders. Together with his uncle, he produces about 90 bags of charcoal from each kiln every four months.

“I know it’s wrong, but what should we do? We want to go back to school if the government can help us,” he says.

While children like Habwaya produce charcoal in rural Monze, traders and transporters move it freely to urban markets such as Lusaka and Mazabuka. Local authorities acknowledge that some transporters operate with forged permits or pay informal fees at roadblocks, a practice that allows the trade to thrive in plain sight.

Sixteen-year-old Alice Mweemba* dropped out of school in Grade Seven.

“There’s nothing to trade here except charcoal,” she says softly. “We would rather burn charcoal than starve.”

When asked about her future, she laughs nervously before murmuring, “Maybe one day I will go back to school.”

At Chona Primary School, head teacher O’Neill Kanene says absenteeism has reached 20 percent this year.

“Some learners walk up to seven kilometres to school every day,” he explains. “Others stay home to help their parents earn a living through charcoal burning.”

Community forestry officer Stanley Hamiyanda has witnessed the crisis unfold first-hand. Covering 13 villages with only a bicycle and ten volunteers, he conducts sensitisation campaigns on the dangers of deforestation and child labour.

“We find boys as young as 10 cutting trees or packing charcoal. During the school term, most children attend only 30 days out of 90,” he says.

His team confiscates charcoal and urges parents to send their children back to school, but within days, the same children return to the forest.

“People have no alternative,” he says. “Water bodies are drying. Farming is nearly impossible.”

In response, Forestry Department acting director Dr Fredd Siangulube says the use of children in illegal charcoal production is a serious concern that must be addressed with humility and firm protection measures. He notes that the charcoal licencing system is designed to prevent child participation, but enforcement challenges persist in districts like Monze, where limited transport hampers effective monitoring.



A boy from Lusaka’s Zingalume Township packs charcoal for sale. Picture by EMILY KUWEMA.

An investigation by the Times of Zambia in Chona Chiefdom reveals a growing crisis. As drought and poverty tighten their grip, children are being pulled out of classrooms to keep households alive. Despite government policies banning hazardous child labour and millions channelled through Constituency Development Fund (CDF) projects to support alternative livelihoods, little has changed.

Despite repeated government pledges to end child labour and promote sustainable energy, oversight in Monze remains weak. Local officials admit that CDF funds meant to support alternative livelihoods have not reached most rural households, while the Forestry Department says it lacks resources to monitor illegal logging and charcoal production.

The road to Chona Chiefdom is lined with scorched patches of land.

Interviews with local leaders, forestry officers, and residents reveal that charcoal production, driven by poverty and limited livelihood options, continues to expand, fuelling deforestation and rising school dropouts.

In the east of Monze, particularly in Chief Chona, Chief Mwanza, and Chief Ufwenuka’s chiefdoms, charcoal production has become the heartbeat of household survival.

Yet, despite these efforts, the crackdown has done little to stop the trade. In the eastern chiefdoms of Chona, Mwanza, and Ufwenuka, charcoal production remains the main source of household income.

“It’s survival,” says Headman Royd Chimbulu. “If the children don’t help, what are they going to eat?”

He says many children now help pack and sell charcoal, some cycling into Monze to hawk it in the streets.

“Even girls have stopped school to join the trade,” Mr Chimbulu adds.

Once rich in woodlands, Chona today has few trees left, not even enough to make basic farming tools. “You can’t find a good tree to make a hoe,” he says. “We have dams, but drought has dried them. If government restored them, maybe we could farm instead.”

Black Gold, Lost Childhoods cont....

He said the department has received multiple reports of rampant illegal charcoal burning in the area and is prioritising strengthening its capacity. To improve the response, Monze and other districts will soon receive mobility support.

Dr Siangulube said 10 motorbikes and four new vehicles will be deployed by the end of the year to districts with the greatest need, a move he says will enhance monitoring of child labour and illegal charcoal burning.

Each day, trucks loaded with charcoal rumble out of Chona. For many families, every bag means another meal, and another tree lost.

According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, charcoal production is classified among the worst forms of child labour due to its health and safety risks.

Ministry spokesperson Mwaka Ndawa says the law clearly prohibits children from engaging in hazardous work such as charcoal production, as outlined in the Employment Code Act of 2019, Statutory Instrument No. 121 of 2013, and the Children’s Code Act of 2022.



Labour inspections and district-level child labour committees are meant to enforce compliance, but enforcement remains weak. The Ministry admits it has no data on children withdrawn from child labour in Monze, even as dozens continue to work openly.

In Chona, legality means little when hunger strikes. According to Global Forest Watch, Monze District had about 86,900 hectares of forest in 2020. By 2024, 248 hectares had already been lost, releasing an estimated 73,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Each year, the district produces roughly 903,000 bags of charcoal, with studies indicating that about 65 percent of the charcoal consumed in Lusaka comes from freshly cleared woodlands rather than agricultural waste.

Communities are urged to prune rather than fell trees, but few comply.

“I only cut branches, not whole trees. I make fewer bags, but at least trees survive,” says charcoal burner Fanwell Michelo.

Forestry officer Stanley Hamiyanda notes that many avoid headmen promoting sustainable methods, choosing instead to cut trees in secret. With no real alternatives, the trade continues unchecked.



Despite clear laws and community awareness, there is little political will to act. Local councils rarely prioritise environmental enforcement, while national authorities focus more on energy shortages than on the human cost of charcoal production. The gap between policy and practice remains wide, and children like Mweemba are caught in it.

She dreams of becoming a nurse one day, but she is unsure that dream will ever come true. Until Chona finds real alternatives, children will keep leaving school, and the forests will keep disappearing.

Community members are urging the government to provide livelihood options such as tailoring, carpentry, and farming support, along with better access to CDF opportunities and water restoration projects. Above all, they want their children back in school.

Evidence from Chona shows that children remain deeply involved in charcoal production despite legal protections. Poverty, drought, and limited economic opportunities continue to drive the practice, while weak enforcement allows it to flourish.

Unless stronger interventions are made, including skills training, improved water supply, and tougher law enforcement, both the forests and the futures of Chona’s children will remain at risk.

Emily is a fellow under the Wildlife Crime Prevention (WCP) fellowship for journalists. The MakanDay Centre for Investigative Journalism, in partnership with WCP, provided training in investigative journalism skills and supported journalists in working on impactful stories that promote environmental protection and drive change.



Mining Firm Secures Licence to Dig in Protected Area

By Ronny Mukontwa

Documents reveal that the government has approved large-scale mineral exploration inside the Mukungule Game Management Area (GMA), a protected wildlife corridor — despite repeated assurances from officials that mining cannot take place in environmentally sensitive zones.

Many residents first heard rumours of a mining company entering the GMA but dismissed them as gossip. That changed when documents surfaced showing that government agencies had quietly signed off on the project.

Questionable consent and limited community awareness

A consent letter, allegedly signed by the Mukungule Community Resource Board (CRB), claims the community approved Unicorn Resources Limited’s exploration licence. But this approval is now in dispute, with critics arguing that the process may violate Section 91(1) of the Environmental Management Act (2011), which guarantees public participation in environmental decision-making.

The letter—purportedly co-signed by CRB coordinator Elias Bwalya and Chairperson Leward Chilufya—states that the board unanimously allowed Unicorn to explore for lead, copper, quartz, emerald, iron ore, cobalt, silver, and gold under licence No. 31012-HQ-LEL.

“Having Perused through the Licence Copy Ministry of Mines, Pegging Certificate of Ministry of Mines, Chief Consent and Company PACRA documents which company availed during the Mukugule Joint CRB Meeting in the presence of all the board members. The Board (CRB) is satisfied to let the company proceed with exploration activities in the licence no 31012-HQLEL in Mukungule Chiefdom,” reads part of the letter

Yet, interviews with residents from Mukungule Market, Chobela — the place where the project is located, and Katibunga revealed that most had never heard of the project. Even WeForest Zambia, a conservation organisation operating in the area, said it was not informed.

A CRB member speaking anonymously alleged that the board approved the project after the chief instructed them to do so during a meeting on 24 January 2024. Efforts to get comment from Chief Mukungule were unsuccessful.

A handwritten “prospecting letter” dated 28 September 2023, however, shows the chief only authorised Unicorn to search for known minerals in the Chobela area—and required the company to report back if minerals were found.

Mukungule GMA borders the North Luangwa National Park and is home to elephants, zebras, hippos, and lions. As a wildlife corridor, it is jointly managed by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) and the CRB.

Who owns Unicorn Resources?

The Patents and Company Registration Agency (PACRA) records show Unicorn Resources Limited is predominantly foreign-owned. Dubai-based Natraj General Trading FZE holds 75,000 shares—giving it effective control.

Indian nationals Sharad Goel and Nitin Kumar Yadav, together with Zambians Kalasa Chibwe and Sheban Mutesu, hold the remaining shares. Goel is listed as the only beneficial owner, underscoring the company’s concentrated ownership and strong foreign influence.

The company’s exploration licence allows for road clearing, drilling, and the establishment of exploration camps.

Environmental approval despite risks

An Environmental Project Brief (EPB) approved by the Zambia Environmental Management Agency (ZEMA) identifies risks such as deforestation, noise, pollution, and loss of wildlife habitats.

In a decision letter signed by acting Director General Karen Banda Etondo, ZEMA said the project was approved after considering submissions from affected parties and site inspections. The approval came “with conditions,” but those conditions appear inconsistent across government agencies.

Government contradictions and evasive responses

Unicorn Resources declined to explain how it obtained authorisation to operate in a GMA, with director Sharad Goel instead questioning the reporter’s sources.

At the Ministry of Mines, Permanent Secretary Dr. Hapenga Kabeta insisted that mining in ecologically sensitive areas is prohibited and rejected suggestions that government is prioritising mining over conservation.

“No, no, no! That’s why the licence for the mining project in the Lower Zambezi National Park was cancelled,” Kabeta said.

Wildlife authority warns of habitat destruction

The Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) admitted that the Unicorn project will fragment animal habitats, displace wildlife, and increase human–wildlife conflict.

DNPW Director Dominic Chiinda said the department approved the project only under strict conditions: limiting operations to handheld tools, banning waste disposal in the GMA, and requiring a Wildlife Police Officer to be stationed on-site at the company’s expense.

However, ZEMA’s approval letter contradicts DNPW’s conditions, allowing heavy machinery such as truck-mounted reverse circulation drills and diamond drilling rigs.

Growing Fears in Local Communities

The project has sparked anxiety among residents living inside the GMA.

“I have lived here for 15 years. What will happen when they discover minerals?” asked 49-year-old widow Judith Musonda, sitting outside her grass-thatched hut.

Others, like 30-year-old father of three Sylvester Tembo, worry about displacement and poor accountability within the CRB.

“We’ve heard stories of people waiting years for compensation, and even then, it’s not fair,” he said.

WeForest Zambia’s Mukungule project manager, Rachel Ndabala, warned that mining could heighten human–elephant conflict and disrupt migration corridors.

ZEMA has instructed Unicorn to avoid indiscriminate tree cutting, replant cleared areas, and protect water bodies from contamination — but residents doubt these safeguards will be enforced.

Ronny is a fellow under the Wildlife Crime Prevention (WCP) environmental fellowship for journalists.

The MakanDay Centre for Investigative Journalism, in partnership with WCP, supported the reporting of this story.



The AI-generated image is for illustrative purposes only and does not represent the actual place or area involved.

Zambia’s Young Gymnasts are Rising!

By Brenda Muzeya

In March this year, authorities found Rongxing, a Chinese-owned mining company, guilty of failing to prevent an acid leak into the Lueta stream — a tributary of the Kafue River, one of Zambia’s major water sources. The leak, which followed a tailings dam failure, affected more than 200 farmers. Yet for the families who depend on the stream, the government’s action brought little comfort.

Coach Siphongile Kasaro expressed gratitude to parents for their support and noted the academy’s impressive progress since its establishment.

“Gymnastics is growing extremely well, and we are impressed with the performances,” Kasaro told MakaanDay.

The Lusaka–Ndola competition marked a major step for the sport locally, giving athletes a platform to showcase their skills. Kasaro hopes that more districts will now join in, especially ahead of Zambia hosting an international gymnastics competition in July 2026.

“We will ensure other districts across the country take part in the regional event,” she said, emphasising the need for more qualified coaches. The academy plans to expand into Eastern and Northwestern Provinces, where it hopes to train local coaches and strengthen the sport nationwide.

Zambia’s young gymnasts have already proved their potential, winning gold and silver medals at the African Youth Development Championship in Harare, Zimbabwe, a breakthrough that has pushed Zambia firmly onto the global gymnastics map.

Kasaro appealed for sponsorship to ensure that talented girls from low-income households are not left behind.

“We offer sponsorship to those who cannot afford, because we want their talent to shine,” she said.

Among the young stars is nine-year-old Diana Daka, who claimed her first medal at the competition. Beaming with pride, she said she is determined to work harder ahead of the next regional event. Her mother, Diana Kasaro, praised the academy’s support and encouraged other parents to enrol their daughters.

The upcoming regional competition in Zambia is expected to draw teams from Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Namibia, and Mozambique, setting the stage for one of the country’s most exciting gymnastics events yet.

Zambia’s National Gymnastics Team Heads to the Region Five Games

Zambia’s national gymnastics team will compete at the Region 5 Games in Windhoek, Namibia, on 11 December 2025. The team features exceptionally talented young athletes:

Level Seven

- Chimwemwe Namwila (12)
- Zion Britton (12)
- Anisha Katanga (14)

Level Five

- H’leziphe Mbale (11)
- Lushomo Mwango (12)
- Bella Mudenda (10)
- Paris Malawo (10)

Brenda is an intern at MakaanDay under the Free Press Initiative’s Journalism Graduate Internship Programme, which aims to promote excellence in journalism.



LOOKING BACK

The story was first published by the Bulletin and Record in December 2013.

The Lunda Welcome Their New Muzungu Chief

By Suzanna Fisher

I recently journeyed to North-Western Province to an area near the source of the Zambezi, where the Lunda tribe overlaps the borders of the DRC and Angola. It is a land of many chiefs and I was there to witness the crowning of my cousin, Paul Fisher, as one of the chiefs of the Lunda.

My grandparents had moved into this area as missionaries in the latter part of the 1800s and they chose to live on Kalene Hill as a way of escaping malaria-carrying mosquitoes. (See The Bulletin & Record, November 2012, “Dr Walter Fisher and the medical battle for African souls”.) In those days there were no prophylactics, quinine was the only known treatment for malaria.

Paul is the only son of ffolliott Fisher and grandson of Dr Walter Fisher and his wife Susanna Darling, who came to these parts in 1889 with the first party of missionaries led by F.S. Arnot. They came to Lobito Bay (in what was then Portuguese West Africa) by ship before the colonial boundaries were delineated, and settled at Kalene Hill in 1918. They began farming at Hillwood in 1921.

Paul, known as Nkana, and now the new Lunda chief, was born in 1932. His primary schooling was at Sakeji, near Ikelenge, and he later went on to Bishops in Cape Toiwn.

On September 17 last year, Nkana Fisher was flown to Kalene Hill by helicopter piloted by his grandson and accompanied by his daughter-in-law Lynne Fisher and family friend Peter Matoka. This short journey of eight kilometres contrasted with the 45 minute drive that most participants in the crowning ceremony had to make over the uneven terrain.

Looking out of the window as we were driven along the rough track that had recently been transformed from a footpath to a road, I reflected how in my grandparents’ time there were no cars or even carts. The ladies were carried through Angola in litters (usually a couch atop carrying poles and shut in by curtains). These were borne on the shoulders of strong young carriers.

Everything required for setting up an establishment, including loads of food, were transported in the same way.

When I was small, father told me that the local people had a special way of communicating with each other as they moved. This was a patois and dialogue that had evolved over centuries and may well have been lost in modern “civilisation”.

The venue for the crowning was chosen because it is neutral territory for a meeting of so many chiefs. The event was held just below the pinnacle where the Fishers had built their camp.

An enormous amount of preparation was obvious throughout the proceedings. Hundreds of chairs had been placed under tarpaulins, which kept the hottest part of the sunlight off the participants and guests. Another cousin, Peter Fisher, coordinated the organising of workers, using walkie-talkies.

Mwanta Nyamwana opened the four-hour proceedings, most of which were conducted in Lunda with only occasional intermissions in English. Peter Fisher explained that he regarded himself as one of the Lunda people.

Peter Matoka, the guest of honour, was very entertaining with his showmanship and sense of fun. He surprised the crowd by donning the official student garb of achievement – an old-fashioned cornered hat, gown and cape. These items from halls of academia contrasted strangely with the grey green tree trunks and vivid spring green leaves in the bush setting. Matoka was well qualified to wear them, having studied psychology at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa. He also has several diplomas from Washington and UNZA and a Phd in sociology from Warwick University in the UK. He and Paul grew up together.

A large number of chiefs presided over the ceremony. They made a colourful spectacle and, in an age where media tends to be electronic, they showed remarkable expertise at entertaining a huge, spontaneous crowd.

Chief Nyakaseya, who was wearing a green and turquoise crown and long chitenge with full skirt, gave a history of the Fisher family. An interpreter explained parts of it.

Most of the large Fisher contingent in the audience was fluent in Lunda. This was how their forefathers had befriended the tribes in the area and brought their understanding of Christianity to the region.

Over the years, in addition to a hospital and orphanage, they built a school for the children of missionaries.

Mavuda Choir sang and danced several times, enlivening the atmosphere with acapella music.

Chiefs Nyilamba and Mukangala performed in their inimitable way, and Chieftainess Ikalenge shortened her speech since time was marching on and the crowd was looking forward to the big event. A ZNBC crew came up the hill to film the excitement that surrounded the crowning.

Paul sat on an animal skin that had been placed on the ground. At age 82 he showed great agility, not to mention humility, in the traditional rolling required over the ages for a person to become elevated to the level of chief.

Senior Chief Kanongesha made a moving speech and had the crowd hanging on his every word. Amongst other things he asked for the opinions of various members of the assembly what they thought of the idea of making Paul a chief. The last person he asked was member of the police force. He had the crowd in silent suspense while he considered hard for several seemingly endless minutes. At last he replied that Paul had brought many kinds of benefit in the form of health and education to the area. He had no objection.

