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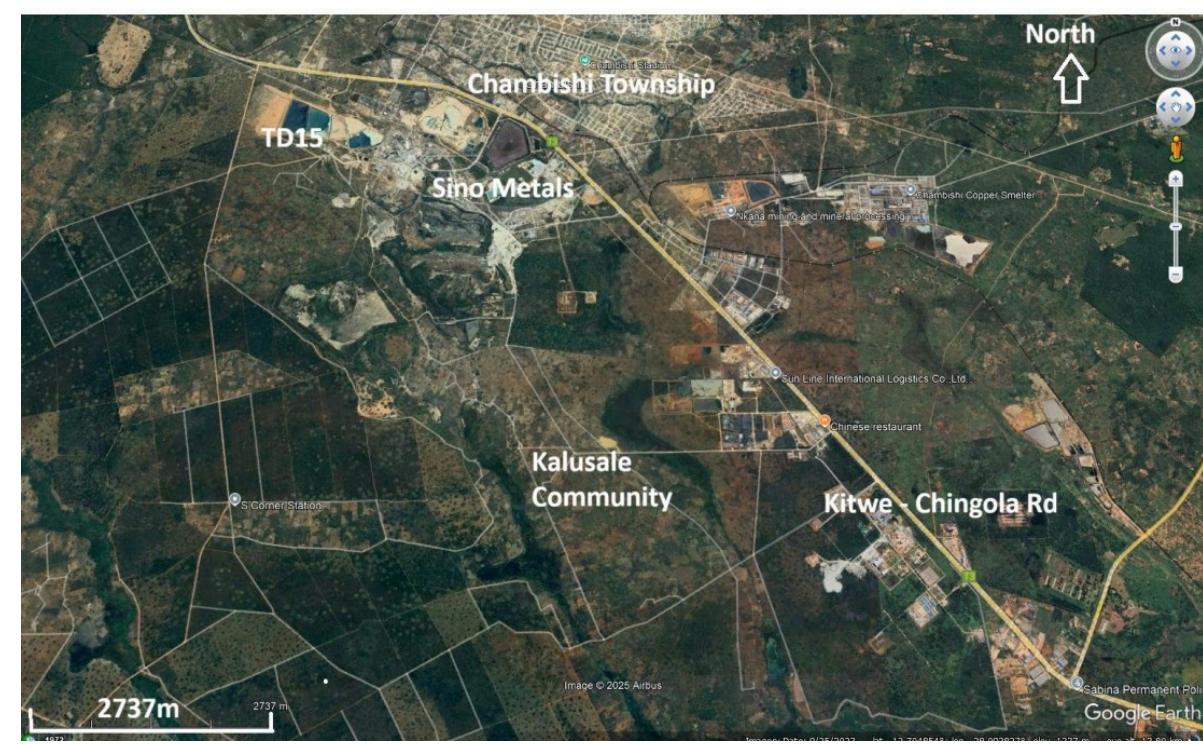
By Ennety Munshya

An independent assessment has confirmed long-held fears that the collapse of a copper waste dam at the Chinese-owned mine, Sino-Metals Leach Zambia Limited, caused significant environmental damage across parts of the Copperbelt, flooding fields and chemically burning crops.

On 18 February 2025, a section of tailings dam at Sino-Metals in Kalulushi collapsed, releasing acidic waste into the surrounding environment. The waste flowed into the Chambishi Stream, merged with the Mwambashi River, and continued downstream toward the Kafue River, one of Zambia's most important water systems.

For communities along the river, the impact was immediate. Water supplies were disrupted. Fields were flooded and crops destroyed. Livelihoods built around farming, fishing, and livestock were thrown into uncertainty.

What followed was officially described as an environmental incident.



Months later, in September, the government commissioned Applied Science and Technology Associates to assess the environmental and socio-economic impact of the Sino Metals tailings dam failure.

The firm replaced Drizit, a South African company previously contracted by Sino-Metals before its engagement was terminated. At the signing ceremony, Zambia Environmental Management Agency (ZEMA) Acting Director-General Karen Banda-Etendo stressed the urgency of the assessment, while consultant Chilekwa Kampeshi said the work would be guided by science.

According to the firm's Environmental and Social Incident Impact Assessment (ESIIA) report, the disaster was not sudden, unavoidable, or purely technical. Instead, it was the product of long-standing failures in oversight and enforcement.

Laws existed. Enforcement did not

Zambia has no shortage of environmental and mining regulations. The Environmental Management Act, the Water Resources Management Act, and mining regulations clearly place responsibility on state institutions to prevent pollution, monitor high-risk infrastructure, and protect public water sources.

According to the report, the Sino-Metals tailings dam failure occurred "within a context of adequate law on paper but weak implementation".

Tailings storage facilities are among the most hazardous structures in mining. International best practice requires continuous monitoring, independent safety audits, emergency preparedness plans, and strong regulator oversight.

The report's findings suggest these safeguards were either insufficient, poorly enforced, or inconsistently applied at Sino-Metals.

The result was predictable. Regulatory intervention came after the dam failed, not before warning signs were addressed.

A spill that shocked the system — briefly

The toxic waste released from the dam were highly acidic, with extreme chemical characteristics. In the short term, the spill caused sharp deterioration in water quality, leading to disruptions in municipal water supply and damage to ecosystems.

Emergency measures, including liming and operational suspension, helped stabilise water chemistry months later. The report acknowledges that by the time of later monitoring, some water quality indicators had returned closer to pre-incident levels.

But this recovery masks a deeper problem. Stabilisation was reactive, undertaken only after contamination had already occurred. The report makes clear that earlier enforcement, monitoring, and preparedness could have reduced or prevented the scale of damage altogether.

Pollution that does not disappear with headlines

While water quality showed signs of recovery, the report identifies persistent contamination in soils and river sediments, particularly in and around the Chambishi Stream.

According to the report, copper and cobalt levels in soils exceed international guideline limits. River sediments continue to act as reservoirs of pollution, capable of re-contaminating water during floods or high-flow events.

The report identifies a core contaminated area of approximately five square kilometres, marked by elevated heavy metals in soil and associated ecological and agricultural risks.

"A core area of approximately 5.35 km² exhibits elevated heavy metals in soil, with associated ecological impairment and agronomic risks." — Environmental and Social Incident Impact Assessment.

This distinction matters. Water may look clean today, but contaminated soils and sediments ensure the legacy of pollution continues, silently and long after public attention fades.

Communities left inside a danger zone

The report identifies at least 158 people living within the mine's pollution control zone, an area considered unsafe for permanent human settlement.

Shallow wells in surrounding communities are deemed unsuitable for drinking. Farmers in high-impact areas face restrictions on land use unless remediation is carried out.

Yet enforcement has been inconsistent. Compensation for damaged crops was paid even to residents without legal tenure, according to the report. While intended as relief, the payments created an unintended incentive. Some farmers returned to contaminated land, increasing long-term exposure risks.

The report calls for urgent resettlement in line with national policy and international safeguards. The continued presence of families in polluted zones underscores how weak enforcement transfers environmental risk from companies and regulators to ordinary citizens.

A problem bigger than one mine

Perhaps the most damning finding is that the Sino-Metals spill is not an isolated case. The report shows that the Kafue River system is affected by cumulative pollution from multiple mining operations, past and present.

Numerous tailings dams, waste rock dumps, and industrial discharges contribute to declining water and soil quality. This means regulatory failure cannot be reduced to one company or one incident. It is systemic.

Sino-Metals did not expose a single weak link, it exposed a governance system that has struggled to regulate an entire mining corridor effectively.

Accountability after the emergency

The report invokes the polluter-pays principle, clearly stating that Sino-Metals must finance remediation, restoration, and long-term monitoring. It recommends stronger enforcement, inter-agency coordination, independent audits of tailings facilities, and early-warning systems for downstream communities and water utilities.

"Use the polluter pays principle and existing instruments (e.g. Environmental Protection Fund, Mines and Minerals (Environmental Protection Fund) Regulations) to ensure that Sino-Metals and other responsible parties finance agreed remediation and restoration measures." — Environmental and Social Incident Impact Assessment.

What the report does not document are clear consequences proportionate to the damage already done. There is no public accounting, within the report, of penalties imposed, regulatory failures addressed, or officials held responsible for lapses in oversight.

Responsibility appears dispersed across agencies, a familiar pattern in environmental disasters, where diffusion of authority results in diffusion of accountability.

How Enforcement Failed Before the Sino-Metals Tailings Disaster Cont...

In a statement issued following a public disclosure meeting convened by ZEMA on 6 January 2026, Sino-Metals said it takes the ESIIA findings and recommendations seriously and committed to continuing remedial and environmental management measures under regulatory guidance.

The company said it has maintained a proactive remediation programme since the incident and pledged to provide further updates as implementation progresses.

From paper reform to real protection

The report reads less like a conclusion and more like a warning. It demonstrates that Zambia's environmental crisis is not rooted in a lack of knowledge, science, or law. It is rooted in enforcement inertia.

Until regulators move from reaction to prevention, from post-disaster assessments to real-time oversight, similar incidents remain inevitable. The cost will continue to be borne by communities living near mines, farmers cultivating marginal land, and citizens who depend on shared water systems.

What remains unanswered is whether enforcement will finally follow — and who will answer for the years when it did not.

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Photo Credit | ZEMA Facebook page & Environmental and Social Incident Impact Assessment (ESIIA) report.

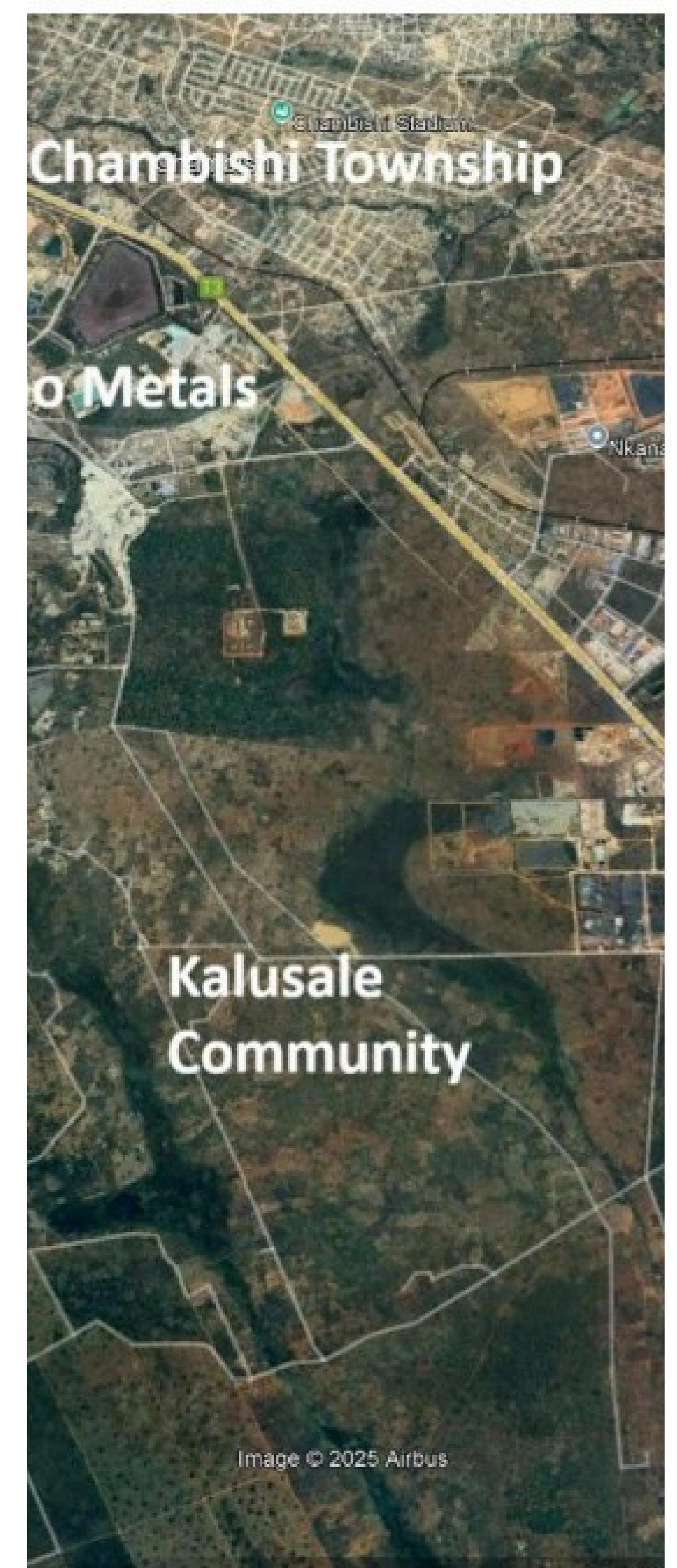


Image © 2025 Airbus

Africa | The growing force of investigative journalism

ZAM Magazine has published a new feature examining the growing force of investigative journalism across Africa, spotlighting how independent newsrooms and reporters are pushing back against corruption, impunity, and shrinking civic space.

The report features insights from several African journalists including MakanDay's Managing Partner, Charles Mafa, highlighting MakanDay's role in strengthening investigative journalism and accountability reporting in Zambia and the region.

Undaunted

They have often had to survive on very little, faced threats both physical and legal, been routinely slandered in online campaigns orchestrated by the powerful, and sometimes forced to work undercover or from exile, but they enter 2026 smiling. ZAM portrays six journalists, members of the NAIRE Network of African Investigative Reporters and Editors, who attended milestone pan-African and global investigative journalism conferences last year, about taking stock of 2025 and their plans for the New Year.

"We got our government to force a corrupt contractor, who had absconded with the country's money, to come back and repair a road that was so bad that children playing nearby were getting killed by veering vehicles. We stood together with the community on that," says Ghana's best-known investigative journalist, Anas Aremeyaw Anas.

In Kenya, data expert Purity Mukami hopes her work exposing nepotistic state contracts benefiting the "nieces of politicians" has contributed to the passage of a new law requiring mandatory wealth declarations. Meanwhile, her colleague Gilbert Bukeyeneza, operating from exile in the Great Lakes region, sighs with relief when reflecting on his Ukweli Coalition Media Hub for establishing vital cross-border reporting with a team in which "each member has grown up in war and crises."

"There is a change"

Down in Zambia, Charles Mafa, cofounder of the Makanday Investigative Journalism Centre, smiles as he announces that he is on his way to pick up a response from his country's Treasury to a query he submitted on a financial matter. "Previously, they would not even talk to us. But there is a change." An important role in establishing investigative journalism as a force to be reckoned with against often oppressive regimes in their countries, they say, has been the growing international amplification of stories produced by NAIRE.

"One story, on Russian recruitment of our citizens for drone factories, has even reached a TV news programme in Japan," says Mafa, adding that politicians in his country tend to "sit up straight when the noise is also coming from outside."

In the case of the "Russia" story, the noise arose from a seven-country collaboration on the ZAM platform, which exposed the exodus of young African women to Russia for deployment in that country's war machine,

a phenomenon that their own governments either ignored or actively facilitated.

Accountability behind closed doors

The journalists are not claiming that their politicians have suddenly reformed.

"Of course, we are still dealing with people who can kill," reflects his colleague from Malawi, Josephine Chinele, recalling a case in which a member of the country's anti-corruption bureau was murdered. "But we are becoming more respected and credible as journalists. People are noticing that we don't just write whatever we like, that we are exposing real ills and that there are real, accountable people behind closed doors."

Chinele is particularly proud of the 'Legal Rebels' investigation, also a cross-border project, which highlighted how committed lawyers in five African countries, including Malawi, strive to address a justice system that, in her words, "unfairly advantages the rich and punishes the poor." "The story we did, where we compared a rich man and a poor man, people were forwarding it on WhatsApp, talking in groups, things like that. People now know that this happens, and they have been engaged with it."

"We are still dealing with people who can kill"

Another example of noise that helps "when it comes from outside" is the court case won in March 2025 by Anas Aremeyaw Anas in the US, in which a notorious millionaire and politician in Ghana — who had defamed Anas as an "extortionist" and "murderer," and whose earlier hate speech against a colleague of Anas was thought to have contributed to the colleague's actual murder (1) — was convicted and ordered to pay damages to the journalist.

"The fact that a journalist was able to haul the politician before a US court is unprecedented. That politician's career is now not working because people are calling him a liar. This sends a message that politicians mustn't take journalists for granted — that we can take the battle to them."

Mukami immediately agrees that international support makes a significant difference. "I would not be here (attending conferences and being invited to workshops on new, better laws) if our story on the wealth of Kenya's first family had not been part of the Pandora Papers. It would have been blocked here in Kenya. Through our international partnerships, we benefited from legal resources that helped proof the story and make it watertight, in a way that we simply cannot do in our own newsrooms. Our editors are often very competent, but they don't have the time or the money."

"Chasing shadows"

All six NAIRE members have in 2025 been invited to pan-African and global investigative journalism conferences, presenting on undercover work, working from exile, trying to find data, "chasing shadows" as Mukami calls it, in Africa's data-poor environment, and highlighting the transnational investigations done with the ZAM platform.

Some also contributed input on the mental health challenges they face.

Gilbert Bukeyeneza: "In our Great Lakes region, all of us are carrying wounds. There has been strife for decades. Many of us, like me, my father was killed because of politics when I was seven, have suffered violence and losses. The worst thing is, we have never had justice. No witness to record what happened. No stock taking, no truth searching. It just stays with us; it festers.

Our families will tell us: these are the people who killed so and so. My drive for our work is that it must not continue to impact on the next generations. I am so happy when I see that our team members, who all come from different backgrounds, countries, and ethnicities, are now going back to their communities and doing this reporting, which serves to make sense of it all.

"In our region, we never had justice"

Agents and colonialists

Politicians and other powerful postcolonial elites in African countries, when outed in investigative stories, often retaliate by calling journalists "agents of the West" or "puppets of colonialists," arguing that only 'colonialists' would criticise an African government. The label does not faze the NAIRE members. "Of course, they call you agents," says Chinele.

"But when people are throwing stones at you, you know that they have an agenda. And that agenda is to stop you. When they come with their accusations, I always say: OK, bring evidence that we were paid to write this.

And our stories stand up." Aremeyaw Anas: "It makes no sense. If the West came to colonise us, it's OK for our politicians to now defraud the public? Can you really make this argument?" "Anyway," says Mukami, "when they said it about us, some people checked and found that the West was paying our government way more than our international partners were giving us as media."

"The West was paying our governments more"

Rwandan Samuel Baker Byansi, now busy with his second book, *Modern Dictatorship*, on Rwanda's autocratic leader Paul Kagame, deals with the accusation of being an 'agent', a claim propelled and multiplied by the Rwandan regime every day of his exiled life. "Some in the West are influenced by the narrative that it is bad to criticise Kagame, or any African government.

But the West must question their role in these people becoming presidents in the first place. The West has contributed to who Kagame is; he gets all his power from the Western world. So if he kills people in Congo and people in Congo are asking the Western world to please stop Kagame, must you not listen to them? The colonial structure that is still in place (through such regimes) still allows the Western world to have access to African countries." 5

Africa | The growing force of investigative journalism

Gilbert Bukeyeneza feels that the West accommodates oppressive African governments too much. "Western governments know very well that when they criticise an African government on human rights, that government will turn their back and go to China. So they often stay silent. All they care about is stability and their own interests in contracts and natural resources."

Elections dawning

In 2026, when both Zambia and Kenya will be preparing for elections, the question of who in the West is supporting whom is becoming acutely important, Mafa and Mukami say. Charles Mafa: "The funders of these candidates are often external (Western) people, as in the case of our current president, Hichilema.

In 2021, this president was elected with so much promise and hope, but because he was supported by the Tony Blair Initiative and the Brenthurst Foundation, now defunct [see (2)], he now pays more attention to those external people and not to the voters. Campaigns are very expensive, candidates fly around in helicopters, who pays for that? The ones who fund the road to the presidency include companies that want mining contracts."

In contrast, Mafa adds, "If it were the voters supporting their candidates, even if it's a farmer selling a cow for that purpose, we could have candidates with no ties to outside forces. I would prefer to see international pro-democracy funding helping these communities in that way or supporting credible organisations that can play a watchdog role in the electoral process."

That is especially urgent now that community organisations are being cut off by the US. "One recent US visitor to Zambia, one of Trump's people, said that 'they are removing the middleman,' meaning the civil society organisations.

They now only want to work with the government. And in Africa, that is the worst. Government already has all the resources. Resources need to be put on the ground, like community-rooted organisations and independent media.

The Trump administration has cut off civil society

In Kenya, Purity Mukami is concerned about dull "he said, she said" reporting on electoral candidates, which she hopes mainstream media will move beyond. "Our people are quite well educated. If you don't give them something with depth, they will abandon you and go to the internet, to TikTok. And nowadays, fake news is almost like the real news. Politicians pay money to broadcast their own narratives. So there is a lot of work to be done for us (journalists)."

Elections can come with violence, too. Recently, the ruling regime shot scores of protesters in the streets of Nairobi. Do journalists in Kenya have reason, once again, to be scared? "Of course you have to be scared," Mukami says. "And it is not just physical violence. They [powerful politicians] openly attack newsrooms,

call you names, and conduct online campaigns to discredit you. And many mainstream newsrooms depend on government advertising."

Being like a hummingbird

But what keeps her going amid all the corruption and power abuse, she concludes with a smile, is Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai's story of the hummingbird that "brings drops of water in its beak, flying up and down with one drop many times, to put out a fire in the forest. The lions and the elephants, with their big trunks, and they could bring much more water, are watching, saying, 'what can you do, you are so small, but she keeps doing it. This is what helps me. I tell myself I am like the hummingbird. I even tell my daughter that story, it's animated, we have watched it a million times. I never want her to feel discouraged or insignificant."

The group puts much of their hopes for 2026, again, in strength in numbers. "We are definitely gearing up around the country for the elections," says Mafa. Gilbert Bukeyeneza wants, he says, to further strengthen journalism's impact at the community level. "I have been amazed at what the reporters managed to do, even if they are often looked down upon as 'just local.' I have seen people feel validated, telling our own stories. It tells me we are on the right track, providing a professional framework, editorial support, and some resources to travel. I hope to be able to equip our Ukweli Media Centre with more editorial back-office support, training, and guidance."

"I feel like I can do anything"

Josephine Chinele also feels much stronger than when she was working as an individual reporter for a paper in Malawi. "Those days we would be told how to do or not to do a story because it would conflict with an advertiser, or sometimes my story would be killed altogether." Now, "invited to conferences, and working with a national investigative journalism platform, the PIJ, and affiliated with NAIRE and ZAM, I am in the right space. I feel I can do anything."

Mukami will likewise continue to draw strength, she says, from the NAIRE group. "It puts people together, and we gain confidence. It is useful to see the patterns and interests in the different countries, like in timber trafficking,

arms trafficking, and mining. And if it wasn't for this group, I could not go up to Anas and say hello." Anas, for his part, says he is "looking forward with lots of smiles: 2026 is going to be a dramatic year, with many projects, not just for Ghana but for the world." He can't talk about the subjects yet, he says, before ending with his trademark comment, "Stay tuned."

"2026 a year of solidarity"

Samuel Baker Byansi is set to make "2026 a year of solidarity," he says, "with the citizens who ask for social justice in Africa. And not only there. We should all align with people who are looking for positive change in their communities, because that also gives security to the rest of the world." He raises migration as an example. "This migration issue in Europe comes from people who have to leave their countries because of insecurities and other problems. But some European governments choose to side with people who cause these very problems. Not only with Kagame, but also in Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. And Israel, of course. When you see a state like the US sanctioning judges of the International Criminal Court, sanctioning ICC prosecutors, that sets a very bad precedent. The ICC should play its role, and international laws should be applied, also in the case of African dictators. Or do the same values not matter when it comes to us?"

1. Millionaire politician and businessman Kennedy Agyapong, a key figure in one of Ghana's main political parties, has conducted a war of hate speech against Anas and his team, calling Anas a "thief," an "extortionist," and even accusing him of murder. But it was Agyapong's hate speech that is considered to have been a factor in a real assassination, namely that of Anas' colleague Ahmed Suale in 2019.

2. The Brenthurst Foundation, which closed its doors in 2025, was a Johannesburg-based think tank established by the mining Oppenheimer family "to promote debate and policy advice for accelerating Africa's economic growth."

Josephine Chinele was invited to the Global Investigative Journalism Conference but was unable to attend due to a family emergency.



Church, State, and the Cost of Accepting Gifts

The Catholic Church has long and deliberately guarded its autonomy from political power. It also provides clear legal and moral guidance on how clerics should handle gifts, whether offered personally or to the Church.

This caution exists for good reason. To prevent precisely the kind of public embarrassment now surrounding the State's decision to summon Archbishop Alick Banda to appear before the Drug Enforcement Commission, following questions over a state asset, a Toyota Hilux, allegedly gifted to him by the previous administration.

While the timing of the summons raises legitimate questions, including why it took so long for authorities to act, such delays do not in themselves excuse the conduct under scrutiny, nor do they absolve the Archbishop of potential wrongdoing.

Much of the public debate has instead focused on alleged hostility between the Archbishop and the current government, largely arising from claims of his alignment with the former ruling party. Particularly absent from this discussion, however, has been a clear articulation of the Church's own position on personal gifts to clerics, an omission that risks obscuring the core ethical and canonical issues at stake.

Under Canon Law, Catholic bishops are not absolutely prohibited from receiving gifts. However, there are clear moral, legal, and pastoral limits, particularly where such gifts may compromise independence, create scandal, or resemble personal enrichment.

In plain terms, Canon Law permits gifts only if they do not undermine the bishop's independence, do not personally enrich him, do not create public scandal, are clearly intended for Church or charitable purposes, and do not align the bishop with political power.

A bishop receiving gifts in a personal capacity, especially cash, violates the spirit, and often the expectations, of Canon Law, even where such conduct is not explicitly defined as a canonical offence.

Canon Law is the legal code that serves as the universal legislative framework governing the life, discipline, and administration of the Catholic Church. It defines the Church as "the People of God," emphasising a communal, not merely institutional, vision of ecclesial life.

While Canon Law permits the faithful to offer material support to the Church, it places a clear obligation on bishops to avoid anything that may undermine their freedom, moral authority, or pastoral credibility.

Under the Code of Canon Law, bishops are required to live as visible examples of simplicity and integrity, carefully avoiding conduct that may cause scandal among the faithful. Gifts that create political obligation, imply influence, or carry expectations of favour are therefore inherently problematic. A gift from the State that appears designed to secure loyalty, silence, or endorsement directly conflicts with this obligation.



Canon Law is also explicit that goods given in connection with ecclesiastical office belong to the Church rather than the individual cleric. Canon 1267 §3 establishes that offerings made to a cleric are presumed to be given to the relevant Church juridic person unless it is clearly proven otherwise.

At the same time, Canon 281 §1 affirms that clerics are entitled only to fitting remuneration for their ministry, not personal gifts linked to influence, status, or political favour. Taken together, these provisions mean that a bishop should not receive gifts in a personal capacity where those gifts arise directly from his public ecclesiastical role.

Even where a gift may be lawful in itself, Canon Law places strong emphasis on appearance, perception, and consequence.

Canon 285 §4 cautions clerics against engaging in conduct unbecoming to the clerical state, while Canon 282 §§1–2 urges them to avoid luxury, accumulation of wealth, or any lifestyle that distances them from the poor.

The public acceptance of cash or high-value gifts, particularly from political authorities,

therefore risks creating scandal, even where no explicit canonical offence can be proven.

The Church also strongly guards its autonomy from political power. Canon 287 §2 prohibits clerics from active involvement in political activity that could blur pastoral neutrality or compromise the Church's independence. Financial gifts from the State, especially during politically sensitive periods, may easily be interpreted as alignment or endorsement.

This explains why, historically, many Catholic bishops have chosen to decline or return state gifts.

Beyond the letter of the law, Catholic tradition, particularly within the African Church, has consistently emphasised that bishops must either decline political gifts or redirect them toward charitable or diocesan purposes, publicly distance themselves from state patronage, and preserve the Church's prophetic voice, especially when speaking truth to power.

It is for this reason that past Zambian bishops returned "brown envelopes" to State House. Not because gifts are always illegal, but because moral credibility and ecclesial independence must be protected at all costs.

The squalid charade surrounding the fading of the most famous man in the world

Is Nelson Mandela dead? Did he die as early perhaps as June 11 and was then maintained in a "permanent vegetative state" only by means of a life support machine? And if he did die, as now seems likely, within days or weeks of his admission to hospital, why was a ghoulish charade perpetrated for months — and to what end? Whatever ultimately happens, whatever the official explanations, these questions will continue to be asked in years to come. Terry Bell reports

In June and July the front pages of newspapers and the covers of magazines around the world carried photographs of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, perhaps the planet's best-known individual. From the moment the 94-year-old anti-apartheid icon was rushed to hospital on June 8 with a recurring lung infection, much international media attention focused on his life and times; television crews jetted in to join the streams of well-wishers that gathered at all hours outside the hospital in Pretoria.

It was admitted that Mandela's condition was serious and forward thinking impresarios began planning tributes while news editors dusted off long-prepared obituaries, adding the latest news as they waited for the expected medical update. But, nearly six months later, there has been no medical update. Instead there have been a series of often contradictory statements by feuding family members and, primarily, by politicians, including President Jacob Zuma.

As the weeks and months went by, squalid squabbling and confusion continued as a small media army watched and waited. For some news organisations such as the BBC, it was an expensive exercise, having a full crew simply waiting for news that never came.

But the media continued to watch and wait because, when Mandela was admitted to hospital, the presidency noted that his condition was "serious but stable". Then, on June 23, Zuma and the governing ANC party's deputy president Cyril Ramaphosa, visited Mandela and announced that Mandela's condition "has deteriorated".

Zuma's spokesperson, Mac Maharaj elaborated, noting: "The condition of former president Nelson Mandela, who is still in hospital in Pretoria, has become critical." So the media stayed put, with nothing to report about Mandela's medical condition, but plenty to speculate about as elements of the Mandela family tore into one another.

As reported in the Bulletin & Record in August, Mandela's ambitious grandson, Mandla, had exhumed the bodies of three of his grandfather's children who had died in earlier years and been buried at Mandela's rural home in Qunu. Aware that Mandela had willed that he be buried "alongside my children" Mandla removed the bodies and reburied them near his own home and recently-built tourist complex, 25km away at Mvezo.

It had become a grubby battle, not so much for the legacy, but for the loot; for the estimated R175 million in Mandela's trust fund, for his homes in Johannesburg

and Qunu and for the considerable income his name could continue to generate in future. This sad and sordid family feud ultimately ended up in court and the bodies of the children were once again returned to their graves in Qunu.

But, in the midst of this furore, the new, largely internet based Las Vegas Guardian Express announced on June 26 that Mandela had died. The report was dismissed, both by government and the mainstream media.

Zuma was quick off the mark the following day, issuing a statement that Mandela's condition had "improved during the course of the night". Zuma added: "He is much better today than he was when I saw him last night. The medical team continues to do a sterling job."

A day later, Ace Magashule, premier of the Free State province and a leading member of the ANC, announced that the Mandela Family had visited the hospital and that they had reported that Mandela was "better than any other day. He is fine." Mandela's former wife, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, then added that the patient had showed "great improvement". However, the presidency then issued what became its single, official — and contradictory — line: Mandela's condition remains critical, but stable.

Then, on July 4, court documents emerged that had been filed on June 26 by Makaziwe Mandela and 14 other family members as part of their battle with Mandla Mandela. These noted that doctors treating the anti-apartheid icon had said that he was in a "permanent vegetative state". The family had been advised to turn off his life support machine. "Rather than prolonging his suffering, the Mandela family is exploring this option as a very real probability," the court application noted.

As a result, the confusion continued as Zuma called on everyone to celebrate Mandela's birthday on July 18, by "doing something good for humanity". And, on July 18, at an official party staged in Pretoria, Zuma announced that he had visited Mandela that morning. "Indeed, I found him really steady and making progress. He was able to smile," he said.

However, toward the end of July, the presidency stated that Mandela's condition "remains critical and is at times unstable." The media army began to decamp. And, on September 1, only a small group of journalists was on hand when an ambulance and escort brought Mandela from Pretoria to his home in the Johannesburg suburb of Houghton where, it was announced, he would continue to receive "intensive care".

As November dawned and what promises to be a bitterly fought election campaign got fully underway, there was still no news. But speculation was rife that the official death and funeral of Mandela would become part of a campaign by the ANC to shore up its flagging support when the elections are staged in April or May next year.

However, if Mandela is in fact only a switch away from being declared officially dead, it is just as likely that the delay in his passing has as much to do with ongoing family feuding involving funeral plans. But the secrecy and unseemly behaviour, the squabbling and the confusion sown has brought no credit on any of the parties.

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