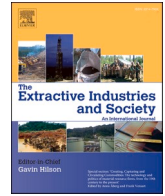




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Original article

## Contention and concessions: Exploring the responsiveness of Chinese mining companies in Africa

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## ABSTRACT

As China's investments are rising fast across the globe, we examine the circumstances under which Chinese mining companies concede to protest. While scholars have already identified success conditions of such struggles, it is unclear if these conditions apply to Chinese cases as well. More so, some research suggests that Chinese business practices fundamentally differ from others. Therefore, we seek to better understand Chinese corporate responsiveness by examining major mining projects from Guinea and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Our analysis draws on protest event data (collected from news and social media), interviews, and further sources to trace protests and company responses. We find that Chinese mining companies indeed concede under similar conditions as Western and other companies: recurrent disruptive actions, pressure from state actors and NGOs, and reputational concerns are key factors for their responsiveness. As we discuss, however, reputational vulnerabilities, which result from global supply chains and transnational activism, are differently distributed in the Chinese case, which undercuts the responsiveness of some major Chinese miners.

### 1. Introduction

China's overseas' investments have risen fast since the 2000s. Chinese corporate and state actors have funded and constructed hundreds of major railway, port, mining, and dam projects, partly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, see [Huang, 2016](#)). The mining industry has been central to China's efforts of 'going global.' In Africa, China has invested about 12.5 billion USD for mining projects since 2008 ([SAIS-CARI, 2024](#)).<sup>1</sup> As such large-scale investment projects often lead to intense contestations ([Hönke et al., 2024](#); [Sändig, 2021](#)), we aim to understand how Chinese corporations respond to resistance from local communities, workers, and civil society groups. Particularly, we ask, under which circumstances do Chinese mining companies concede?

Our analysis is motivated by a literature gap regarding conflicts over mining and other large-scale investment projects. Scholars have extensively examined these contestations concerning the local grievances, means of resistance, and dynamics of interaction ([Aalders et al., 2021](#); [Conde and Le Billon, 2017](#); [Haslam and Tanimoune, 2016](#)). Some have already studied the corporate responses and success conditions of mining struggles ([Hönke, 2013](#); [Özkaynak et al., 2021](#); [Scheidel et al.,](#)

[2020](#)). These studies suggest, along rationalist lines, that mining companies do concede when protesters (threaten to) impose high costs on their operations, whether through disruption or reputational damages ([Frederiksen, 2018](#); [Steinberg, 2019](#)). But this argument has been based mostly on Western and other non-Chinese investors. Hence, there is a literature gap since the relevance of these success conditions of contestation remains unclear for Chinese (mining) companies so far.

Our research question is, furthermore, inspired by the debate about the potential otherness of Chinese corporate practices. Especially Western publics and policymakers have often been alarmed about what they perceive as China's disregard to human rights and to responsible business practices ([The Economist, 2011](#)). Scholars have debunked many of the typical allegations, e.g. about 'debt traps' and imported Chinese workers in Africa ([Brautigam, 2009](#); [Brautigam, 2020](#); [Yan and Sautman, 2013](#)). Rather, these studies demonstrated similarities in the social and environmental conduct of major Chinese, Western, and other companies ([Irwin and Gallagher, 2013](#); [Oya and Schaefer, 2023](#)). Yet, the literature also highlights particularities of Chinese corporate actors and their practices ([Lee, 2017](#); [Wyrod and Chang, 2023](#)). Hence, Chinese corporations may respond differently to contentious actions than others.

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<sup>1</sup> Estimate of FDI flows (2008-2022), of which roughly a quarter was in the mining sector ([SAIS-CARI, 2024](#)).

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Our goal, therefore, is to better understand the responsiveness of Chinese industrial mining companies operating in Africa. Our theoretical framework integrates theories on the success conditions of contention (from social movement studies) and on the relevance of reputational vulnerability (from the business and society literature) into mining conflict research. By responsiveness, we refer to corporate efforts of pursuing dialogue and making small-scale concessions in direct response to contentious actions (Trebeck, 2008). Such rather tangible and immediate responses can be – but are not necessarily – part of more formal and institutionalized corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices (Sändig, 2024). We, furthermore, consider concessions in the context of repression (Hönke, 2012), and discuss the role of other factors (particularly company size and location) for contestation and responsiveness (Haslam and Tanimoune, 2016).

Empirically, we study major Chinese mining projects from Guinea and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which are hotspots of China's investment in Africa (Ericsson et al., 2020). These countries share similarities regarding the repressive political regime and low level of state capacity, whereby they offer insights for many similarly constituted political contexts in the Global South. From these countries, we selected each a case of high and low responsiveness. The analysis draws on protest event data collected from news, social media, and NGO sources to trace contentious actions and corporate responses. Moreover, we conducted about 40 interviews (including focus group discussions) at the mine sites and used company reports for contextualization.

We show that the responsiveness of Chinese mining companies largely follows the rationalist arguments known from the literature on Western and other non-Chinese cases. The examined companies mostly conceded when facing sustained disruptive actions and pressure from hosting state elites and domestic and international NGOs (INGOs). Reputational vulnerabilities, which emerge from global market exposure and become amplified by transnational activism, also contribute to their responsiveness. This implies, however, that Chinese mining companies, which mainly cater China's domestic market and face little transnational activism, tend to remain less responsive. In this regard, Chinese corporate responsiveness differs from Western cases where reputational vulnerabilities are more equally distributed and higher overall.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Contentious actions and (Chinese) corporate responsiveness

Industrial mining – like large-scale investment for plantations, ports, dams, or pipelines – is usually hailed for furthering development through increased state revenues, job creation, and improved local infrastructure. Local communities, however, almost always carry the burden (Hilson, 2002), e.g. through the loss of communal land and livelihoods, poor compensation, lack of information and participation, and pollution (Dell'Angelo et al., 2021; Prause and Le Billon, 2020).

As a result, mining and other investments frequently become contested by varied means (Sändig, 2021). Locally, people often rely on everyday resistance and organized community actions, such as marches, road blockades, and petitioning. Workers and trade unions have the unique means of striking. Scholars have proposed varied arguments to explain the occurrence, tactics, and scope of these mining contestations (Conde, 2017). These studies highlight the relevance of the local geography, community resources, and mining impacts on livelihoods (Conde and Le Billon, 2017; Haslam and Tanimoune, 2016). Grievances and threats caused by mining, however, do not necessarily translate into larger protests since these also require organizational efforts and political opportunities (Arce, 2014). Particularly, elite allies and outside civil society organizations enable broader struggles that reach into the national or transnational sphere (Engels, 2018).

There is limited knowledge so far on how the investors' country of origin affects these struggles. While the literature suggests that local

actors challenge foreign extractive companies more than domestic ones (Wegenast and Schneider, 2017), local resistance seems similarly frequent and intense against Chinese, Western, and other foreign investors (Christensen, 2019; Steinberg, 2019). The opportunities for transnational activism, however, differ significantly depending on the political context of the investors' 'home' country and the reach of transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). This is evident in the case of China, where the space for contention is constrained, where NGOs pursue cooperative strategies, and where they focus on domestic rather than overseas' investment (Sändig and Hönke, 2024; Shipton and Dauvergne, 2021).

In response to resistance and to manage their social relations, mining companies typically use both 'sticks' and 'carrots' (Bechtum, 2024; Hönke, 2013). Among the former, miners usually rely on fencing and private security contractors for turning the mine into an enclave. They also seek close relations with the state, which often deploys security forces and criminalizes activists to suppress protest. Among the 'carrots', these companies often engage in clientelist practices to coopt political elites for controlling local populations (Hönke, 2018). Relatedly, they use strategies of social engagement through dialogue, concessions, and formal CSR programs (Welker, 2009).

Our focus is particularly on company responsiveness, i.e. efforts to pursue dialogue and make small-scale, one-off concessions in direct response to contentious actions (Trebeck, 2008).<sup>2</sup> This can include various means, such as compensation to local communities (financial, resettlement, or social projects that address specific grievances), clean-up of pollution, salary raises, and improved working conditions. Such targeted social and environmental actions can be – but are not necessarily – part of broader CSR programs (Sändig, 2024). The mining industry has widely used CSR to reduce operational risks by buying a 'social license to operate' (Bechtum, 2024; Frederiksen, 2018). Through more institutionalized CSR programs, miners typically provide community development projects, services (goods, trainings, micro-credits, etc.), and dialogue (e.g. through complaint mechanisms). In concession to protest, hence, a company may expand or target CSR actions towards the protesting constituency.

The literature is ambivalent on whether Chinese corporations (in mining and beyond) follow common industry practices or have distinct approaches. On the one hand, studies suggest that Chinese and other foreign companies alike regularly respect host country regulation and apply global standards of environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG, see IDI, 2019; Tang, 2020). China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs), especially if operating under the BRI, are particularly under pressure to endorse CSR practices for reputation-building goals of the Chinese state (Liu, 2021). Chinese CSR combines parts of the Western liberal script but also taps into Chinese traditions of corporate social engagement (Bunskoek, 2024). Moreover, globally-operating Chinese companies face supply chain pressure from downstream companies and CSR-aware consumers. As a result, the operations of many large Chinese mining companies increasingly resemble those of their international peers (Ericsson et al., 2020, p. 166).

On the other hand, Chinese corporations show particularities. These corporate actors place strong emphasis on relationship building with hosting country elites and they often lack experience with NGOs (SOMO, 2021). Chinese management and staff tend to face particularly large social and cultural gaps vis-à-vis the hosting communities and local workers. The interactions remain limited since the Chinese employees usually live in segregated compounds, face huge language barriers, and share a distinct hard work ethos and in some cases even racist stereotypes (Driessen, 2019; Lee, 2017; Visser and Cezne, 2023). Chinese mining companies also appear more reluctant to apply local content

<sup>2</sup> To specify the time frame, this mainly regards company responses that occur within days of the protest event. Later responses (up to half a year after the protest) were also considered if there was a clear link to the complaints.

policies (Wilhelm, 2023). Regarding responsiveness, Chinese miners may therefore struggle with local dialogue, make fewer concessions, and resort more to repression in their overseas' operations.

## 2.2. Success factors of contention

Research on mining and other large-scale investment projects, as well as the broader social movement literature, reveals several success factors of contention. By success, we do not focus on efforts of overcoming mining projects in the first place, like in the Latin American community referendums (Walter and Urkidi, 2017). In the African settings studied here, local resistance was limited during the exploration and construction stages and the struggles revolve around increased benefits from operating companies. Hence, we treat company concessions as success and would assume that unresponsive companies rely more on repression and cooptation.

A prominent argument, mostly based on Western and other non-Chinese cases, holds that extractive companies operate rationally in that they concede to contentious actions if the protesters impose high costs on the business (Rutten et al., 2017; Steinberg, 2019). In this view, companies weigh the potential costs of (continued) protest against the costs of social actions (Trebeck, 2008). The question then is what protest actions and contextual factors shape the costs and make concessions likely.

The literature suggests several major success conditions of contestation: (1) intense disruptive means of contention, (2) mobilization of outside allies, and (3) companies' reputational vulnerability. First, studies show that local actors have the powerful means of disrupting company operations by simple road blockades or worker strikes (Rutten et al., 2017). As mining is costly and site dependent, companies often cannot circumvent such blockades and quickly lose millions of US-dollars in revenue (Steinberg, 2019). Whereas companies can stand isolated and short-lived disruptions, recurring and heavily disruptive protests make concessions likely (Özkaynak et al., 2021; Scheidel et al., 2020). While violent means are rare in these struggles, violent disruptions could be assumed as more effective, given that companies are vulnerable to vandalism and that staff members may fear for their security. Yet, studies on civil resistance suggest that non-violent actions are more likely to succeed (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). These have higher chances of arousing broader participation, winning political support, and evading repression.

Second, large-scale investing companies seem more likely to concede if they face pressure from broader activist alliances and state actors (Gagné, 2019; Scheidel et al., 2020; Walter and Wagner, 2021). Domestic NGOs often play important roles on the ground by documenting rights violations, rallying public pressure, and alerting political authorities (Pallas and Bloodgood, 2022; Sändig and Hönke, 2024). Political actors from various levels (including governors, mining ministers, or legislators) may intervene by threatening state sanctions and stricter regulation. Additionally, the struggles may reach the transnational arena, particularly when activist networks alert international organizations, mobilize foreign governments, and challenge the company at 'home' (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Tarrow, 2005). The latter involves varied means, such as calls for consumer boycotts, formal complaints with investment grievance mechanisms, shareholder activism, and direct action at the company headquarters (McAteer and Pulver, 2009).

Third, the literature highlights the role of reputational concerns. A company that depends on a positive reputation for its business is more likely to concede to protesters, who may tarnish its public image (King, 2008). Such reputational vulnerability differs, depending on the companies' global market exposure, visibility, and size of operations (King and McDonnell, 2015; Martin et al., 2017). Major international miners that have brands to defend and cater to companies and consumers who care about responsible business conduct have high incentives for responsiveness (Frederiksen, 2018). In contrast, smaller and less internationally visible mining companies that mainly supply customers and

consumers within the Global South, where companies face fewer expectations and less scrutiny for social conduct, tend to be less responsive (Sändig and Hönke, 2024). In such a case, 'when firms are not much concerned about their reputation, pressure from consumers, peers, shareholders, or NGOs may yield hardly any effects on the CSR activities' (Börzel et al., 2012, p. 8). Before assessing these theories for the Chinese cases, we outline the case background and methodology.

## 3. Background – Comparative design and cases

### 3.1. Methodology

To better understand Chinese corporate responsiveness, we examine cases from Guinea and the DRC. We selected these countries because they have been hotspots of China's recent mining investment (Ericsson et al., 2020) and because their political context makes these cases more broadly relevant. Both are autocratic regimes that constrain public protest but also have low state capacity, particularly for providing services and enforcing regulation. At the same time, the countries differ regarding civil society structures. While Guinea's civil society heavily relies on collective action and trade unions, the DRC has more developed NGO structures. By these features, the cases are clearly not globally representative but insightful for many mining contestations that unfold under similar circumstances in the Global South.

Our focus is on some of these countries' largest mining operations to ensure wide data availability. Based on our communication with NGO partners, we selected one highly and one lowly responsive company case per country. Given that these are new investments, our time frame starts by the mid-2010s only.

For the analysis, we collected protest event data on how various actors (local communities, workers, NGOs, etc.) contest the companies, what interactions unfold, and when concessions are made.<sup>3</sup> This draws on varied sources, most importantly domestic and international news, social media (Twitter, Facebook), and NGO reports.

Additionally, we conducted interviews at the mine sites, facilitated by the NGO Southern Africa Resource Watch (SARW). About 40 interviews (including several focus group discussions) were held with local communities (including youths, women, and elderly), local authorities, NGO staff, workers, and company representatives (community liaison officers in particular).<sup>4</sup> Some interviews were conducted by phone due to health concerns during the Covid-19 pandemic. For contextualization, we derived information from company websites and their ESG reports.

There are some limitations to the study. Relying much on media reports, we have more evidence on (large) collective action events than small-scale protests like everyday resistance, community petitions, and verbal complaints. Moreover, linking protest events and concessions is difficult because there can be complex causality, a time lag, and underreporting of concessions, which make fewer headlines than protest actions. We mitigated this through the interviews and analysis of company and NGO documents.

Classifying companies as Chinese is challenging in itself. By this expression, we refer to companies that are headquartered within China and/or predominantly run by Chinese nationals. Yet, as also evident in some of our cases, mining companies typically operate through joint ventures and based on acquisitions. Hence, there are often multinational structures that involve co-ownership by the hosting state and local subcontractors. The diffusion of global industry standards and norms,

<sup>3</sup> Protest event documentation can be obtained from the authors upon request.

<sup>4</sup> The interviews were held by experienced civil society persons at Kinshasa, Fungurume, and Kolwezi in the DRC (between December 2021 and May 2022) and at various places of Guinea's Boké region in March 2022. Interview quotes were translated from French by using [www.deepl.com](http://www.deepl.com).

furthermore, re-shapes the ‘Chinese’ practices. Therefore, we closely inspect the company structures, practices, and position within global markets.

### 3.2. Mining in Guinea and the DRC

Guinea and the DRC are major global mining countries. As the world’s third-largest bauxite producer, Guinea supplies 18 % of the global production (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Regions and Tourism, 2020, p. 161). The bauxite industry, located in the regions of Boké and Boffa, had fallen into decades of stagnation, until the arrival of Chinese miners from 2015 on (Knierzinger, 2018). In 2017, a US\$ 20 billion deal was agreed between China and Guinea for new mines and processing facilities. Currently, four major Chinese companies produce 57 % of Guinea’s bauxite outputs (Ministère des Mines et de la Géologie, 2021, p. 3).

The DRC is by far the world’s leading cobalt miner (71 % global market share) and also Africa’s largest copper producer (Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Regions and Tourism, 2020, pp. 154, 162). Located along the Katangan Copperbelt in the Southeast, most mines were originally constructed by Western miners during the 2000s. Meanwhile, Chinese companies have taken over many of these mines and constructed new ones. A persistent problem in the region is the precarious livelihoods of tens of thousands of artisanal miners (Nkumba, 2020). They became displaced from the mineral-rich soils for the construction of the industrial mines. Lacking artisanal mining zones, these ‘clandestine’ miners often operate illegally on the company concessions, where they risk expulsion, beating, and arrest by security agents (Katz-Lavigne, 2019).

### 3.3. Company cases and responsiveness

The four selected companies are major players in the respective countries (see Table 1). In the DRC, we look at Tenke Fungurume Mining (TFM), operated by CMOC (formerly China Molybdenum). This is the second-largest copper and cobalt mine in the country behind Glencore’s operations. TFM has a vast concession (1600 km<sup>2</sup>) and huge surrounding population. Initially operated by the US-based Freeport-McMoRan and Canada’s Lundin, CMOC acquired the mine in 2016. As detailed below, TFM has shown high responsiveness.

In the DRC, we also examine the *Compagnie Minière de Musonoie*

(COMMUS). The copper and cobalt mine is set in an urban location at Kolwezi. It was newly constructed (2015–2017) as branch of Zijin, China’s largest gold mining company. Like TFM, COMMUS operates both a mine and metallurgical plant for copper cathode production. It has low responsiveness – according to an NGO, ‘nothing really influences COMMUS’ (IBGDH, 2023, p. 2).

In Guinea, we focus on the *Société Minière de Boké* (SMB), which had started in 2015 and become Guinea’s largest bauxite project by 2018. The company runs several mining areas, two ports, and a newly constructed railway. SMB mainly belongs to Chinese-owned companies from mainland China and Singapore, but as a multinational consortium also has Guinean stakeholders and a French CEO. Despite continued community and worker dissatisfaction, we consider the company rather responsive for its donations and improvements of ESG practices in response to the contestations.

Finally, we examine the *Compagnie de Développement des Mines Internationales Henan-Chine* (CDM-Chine), which operates a large bauxite mine at Kabara district, Southeast of Boké city. The mine construction was part of the mentioned 2017 Sino-Guinean deal. Its parent company is China Henan International Cooperation Group (CHICO), a construction enterprise belonging to the government of Henan province. While CDM-Chine hands out donations to local communities through a CSR program (CHICO, n.d.), its responsiveness to protest has been very low. The company has hardly conceded at all, despite intense labor struggles.

## 4. Comparative analysis

We observe major grievances and protests in all cases. In many ways, the means of contention resemble and reflect the typical action repertoire of mining conflicts, such as road blockades, marches, strikes, petitioning, NGO reporting, and instances of riots and vandalism (Prause and Le Billon, 2020). Strong local discontent is underlying these actions. In all cases, communities raise complaints about the lack of development benefits, the shortage of jobs, insufficient compensation, lack of influence on company decisions, and pollution. The company workers have also generally been aggrieved over the salary, working conditions, intimidation, and sometimes abusive firing. While these are common grievances for the mining industry and even large-scale investment projects altogether, our cases do not show fundamental struggles against the presence of mining and mining companies per se.

**Table 1**  
Overview on the companies.

Company	Country	Ownership	Mining stages	Location	Size (production rate 2021)	Responsiveness
<b>TFM</b> Tenke Fungurume Mining	DRC	CMOC (80 %), DRC state (20 %)	Constructed and operated by Freeport-McMoRan (USA) and Lundin (Canada) 2009–2016; acquired by China Molybdenum (CMOC) in 2016	Semi-urban (mine and plant between Tenke and Fungurume)	Very large (209,000 t copper, 18,500 t cobalt)	High
<b>SMB</b> <i>Société Minière de Boké-Winning Consortium</i>	Guinea	Winning Shipping (Singapore, 41 %), UMS (Guinea, 27 %), China Hongqiao (China, 23 %), Guinean state (10 %)	Construction (first half 2015), operational since mid-2015	Semi-urban (mines around Boké city, ports at Katougouma and Dapilon)	Very large (31.5 million t bauxite)	Rather high
<b>COMMUS</b> <i>Compagnie Minière de Musonoie</i>	DRC	Zijin Mining (China, 72 %), DRC state (28 %)	Construction (2015–2017), operational since mid-2017	Urban (mine and plant at Kolwezi)	Large (120,000 t copper, 1600 t cobalt)	Low
<b>CDM-Chine</b> <i>Compagnie de Développement des Mines Internationales Henan-Chine</i>	Guinea	China Henan International Cooperation Group (CHICO, 100 %)	Construction (first half 2017), operational since mid-2017	Rural (Kabara district, Tanéné and Daramagnaky subprefectures)	Large (4.8 million t bauxite)	Very low

Sources: Compiled by the authors, based on reports by the companies, mining ministries, and the Extractive Industries and Society Initiative (EITI).

The repertoires of contention also vary to some extent. As mentioned, collective action (road blockades, riots, strikes) is more highly prevalent in Guinea, whereas petitioning and NGO reporting are more frequent in the DRC (Sändig and Hönke, 2024). Conflicts with artisanal miners occur only in the DRC cases, as no artisanal mining exists in Guinea's bauxite sector. Artisanal miners in the DRC frequently trespass on industrial mining concessions, whereby they pursue everyday resistance (Katz-Lavigne, 2019). Moreover, they occasionally engage in violent actions of looting and vandalism.

Overall, there is no silver bullet means of contention that leads to concessions. Rather, we find that intense disruptive actions and pressure from political authorities and NGOs enable concessions (see Table 2). But these effects also depend on the companies' reputational concerns, which emerge from global supply chain pressure and transnational activism.

#### 4.1. Intensity of disruptive actions

Intense disruptive actions are effective to push Chinese mining companies into concessions. These actions usually occur after protest letters, verbal complaints, or strike warnings went without response or concessions. Then, affected communities mount road blockades and workers go on strike or use other direct action. Repression is a common response to this in both Guinea and the DRC, yet it does not preclude negotiations and concessions.

The early stages of SMB show how recurrent disruptive actions can lead to responsiveness. In 2015, the company had taken off in a rush without adequate social and environmental planning. Causing significant land and livelihood losses, while offering few jobs and development benefits, the company met a wave of community and worker protests. In numerous instances during 2016 and 2017, communities blocked roads and SMB's port workers and truck drivers went on strike. Many of these actions led to negotiations, in which SMB conceded to small-scale demands. For instance, the company agreed on watering roads to prevent dust pollution, which heavily affects local health and agriculture (Action Mines Guinée, 2016, pp. 3–5). Ultimately, riots shook Boké and other cities within the region in April and September 2017. Angry youths clashed with security forces, vandalized state agencies, and looted property of SMB and other mining companies (Guinée Matin, 2017). In response, SMB addressed key grievances by providing power generators to impoverished neighborhoods.

Facing such intense disruptions, SMB became a rather responsive company. Since mid-2017, SMB has regularly donated goods (like rice, vehicles, scholarships, and animals for cultural festivities) to affected communities and undertaken measures for mitigating its environmental and livelihood impacts (HRW, 2018, pp. 6–11). While the donations were partly designated as a reward to communities that refrained from contentious actions (HRW, 2018, p. 109), SMB also further conceded to disruptive protests. For example, in a protracted conflict at Malapouya, SMB increased its compensation for livelihood losses from the newly constructed railway only after the communities blocked the mine site in December 2019 (Dépêche Guinée, 2019; SMB, 2019).

Interviewees recounted that disruptive actions were key for entering into dialogue and achieving concessions from SMB. As an NGO respondent expressed, 'when there's a demonstration, the Chinese come and meet the authorities. But there's no such thing as sitting down and negotiating when there's no problem. But when there's a problem, they go to the authorities and go with the authorities to the community to negotiate their problems.'<sup>5</sup>

Relatedly, the protest recurrence mattered, as pointed out by a mining ministry respondent:

If the companies [like SMB] have strong state backing, they say 'no.' But when the situation persists (...) it can't be good for the company. If the company knows that its interests are threatened, and that if it refuses, it won't win the dispute, it complies and respects certain community demands.<sup>6</sup>

TFM has also seen (the threat of) significant disruptive actions and responded with concessions. Following all worker strikes (November 2016, May 2020, June 2021), the company conceded by improving working conditions and salary. Particularly, the huge population of artisanal miners has posed a constant threat of disrupting TFM's operations. As thousands of artisanal miners operate in the mine area daily, there are regular confrontations with security personnel. When they are denied access or become arrested, injured, or killed by security guards, artisanal miners typically storm the mine, loot, and vandalize. The company has often responded to this permanent threat by repression. In mid-2019, the Congolese military even intervened at TFM and Glencore's mine site to dispel artisanal miners. But there are also tacit concessions to key demands of artisanal miners, since TFM leaves them operating in peripheral mine zones. After riots in August 2019, the military efforts of chasing artisanal miners out of TFM's concessions were eased and the miners openly allowed to work in an area nearby TFM (Cuvelier, 2020, p. 1).

The cases provide mixed evidence on the effectiveness of violence. Violence is often not strategically chosen in the first place but results from escalation when security forces intervene by arresting protesters and using tear gas or live ammunition. The riots at SMB and the artisanal miner invasions at TFM suggest that violence can work to achieve concessions. Yet, it also entails repression and was not necessarily more effective than the numerous non-violent actions in these cases.

In the lowly responsive cases (COMMUS, CDM-Chine), we observe fewer disruptive protests, especially by local communities. At COMMUS, artisanal miners engaged in some incursions, looting and vandalizing company property (Reportage Sans Frontières TV, 2021). In response, similar to TFM, the company has tacitly granted artisanal miners access to its rock disposal areas.<sup>7</sup> COMMUS' workers went on three strikes in 2020 and 2021. The first concerned harsh lockdown conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic. While TFM quickly conceded to a similar strike in May 2020 by a bonus payment (Reuters, 2020), COMMUS refrained from concessions and had security forces disrupt the strike (La Guardia Magazine, 2020). After the third strike, COMMUS accepted the formation of a trade union, upon the mediation by Lualaba's provincial government (COMMUS, 2021). Yet, by restructuring its operations in 2022, COMMUS curtailed the union's influence, which now covers only the factory but not the mine workers anymore.<sup>8</sup> Overall, these disruptive actions have been less intense than at SMB and TFM, which allowed COMMUS to evade significant concessions.

CDM-Chine has faced extensive disruptions only from striking workers. Around ten strikes occurred between mid-2019 and early 2022, some lasting for weeks. The company held numerous negotiations with the workers' union and struck several agreements, yet it repeatedly abrogated from its pledges or made meagre concessions. For instance, CDM-Chine improved worker transport and increased wages by roughly 10 % in October 2021, but this fell far short of the union's demand for a 300 % increase.<sup>9</sup> While the striking workers caused significant disruptions, the overall intensity of disruptive actions has been lower than at the more responsive SMB. Local communities have hardly challenged CDM-Chine. Its remote rural location and small adjacent population has largely spared the company from community conflicts.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with regional mining authority, Boké, 10 March 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with state actors, Kinshasa, March 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with civil society figure, May 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a CDM-Chine worker, Kawessi, 8 March 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with NGO representative, Boké, 10 March 2022.

**Table 2**  
Overview on factors.

Factors	TFM (DRC)	SMB (Guinea)	COMMUS (DRC)	CDM-Chine (Guinea)
Intensity of disruptive actions	Medium (frequent artisanal miner incursions, occasional community and worker actions)	High (numerous community protests, many worker strikes)	Low (occasional worker strikes, few artisanal miner incursions)	Medium (frequent worker strikes, only rare community actions)
State and NGO pressure	High (high-level political actors involved; advocacy by prominent domestic and INGOs, incl AFREWATCH, RAID, SARW)	Medium (local to national state actors regularly involved as mediators; INGO involvement by HRW)	Medium (advocacy by local and regional state actors, especially the Lualaba Relocation Commission; mostly only local NGOs involved)	Low (local and regional state actors occasionally involved in mediation, nearly no domestic NGOs present, no INGO actions)
Reputational vulnerability	High (TFM is a key supplier of cobalt for global markets)	High (SMB is significant supplier of bauxite to China, used for global automotive industry)	Medium (COMMUS supplies copper mainly to China, partly used for global markets)	Low (CDM-Chine supplies bauxite for China's domestic market, few global linkages)
Responsiveness	High	Rather high	Low	Very low

4.2. State and NGO pressure

Concessions become more likely if state actors and NGOs intervene on behalf of affected local groups. We observe that these outside actors can take the contestation to a higher and more professional level, which reinforces local collective action. They typically become involved upon verbal or written complaints by local communities or workers, or if disruptive actions occur. NGOs may then document rights violations, raise media attention, and call upon state actors. State actors, in turn, can try to mediate solutions and themselves put pressure on the company to address local grievances. Yet, more often they deploy security forces for repressing protests. Either way, state actors at all levels in Guinea and the DRC have strong interests in keeping the companies running since mining revenues are central to the political economy and regime survival.<sup>10</sup>

Such pressure has contributed to TFM's high responsiveness. A key example is the Kabombwa situation. Shortly after TFM built a lime plant in 2020, people in the nearby village Kabombwa developed severe skin rashes (SARW, 2022). Upon the community alert, various NGOs and politicians took up the issue. An expert commission documented the pollution, major Congolese NGOs called on TFM for relocating the village, a politician filed a lawsuit, and the community engaged in a road blockade. Since involved NGOs (AFREWATCH, SARW) have transnational ties, this could have turned into an internationally known issue with impact on CMOC's reputation. Ultimately, when Lualaba's interim governor asked TFM to take medical charge, the company agreed to relocate the affected community (AFREWATCH, 2022).

In other instances, too, TFM conceded to state and NGO pressure. For example, a broad alliance of Congolese NGOs challenged the company for not consulting local communities when drafting its task book for local development in July 2020 (Coordination des Actions de Plaidoyer de la Société Civile, 2020). The NGOs invoked the DRC's new mining regulation, which requires the participatory development of such task books. In response, TFM worked with SARW for community consultation during September 2020. Moreover, TFM's lenient response to artisanal miners and their protests is shaped by the extensive NGO monitoring, involving various domestic and INGOs, such as Amnesty International (2019).

At SMB, we similarly observe that political and civil society support has fostered responsiveness. Local authorities mostly tend to not openly challenge the company due to its high national relevance. But they share many of the grievances, as we found in interviews, and hence condone and tacitly support contentious actions. In response to protest, political authorities (like prefects, subprefects, and mayors) regularly mediate

agreements. For instance, when the local community of Katounou blocked SMB's operations in July 2022, a joint delegation of these political authorities negotiated with local protest leaders and the mine director, who agreed to improve local water supply (Africa-Press, 2022). Aside from repression, such mediation is important for Guinean state actors to maintain stability. Whereas Guinean NGOs have hardly become involved here, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has advocated the community issues in two major reports (HRW, 2018; HRW, 2021). This produced substantial international media attention and pressure on SMB.

At COMMUS, there have also been political and NGO interventions, yet these have been more localized and less powerful than at TFM. Given its urban setting at Kolwezi and lack of a buffer zone, COMMUS' operations heavily affect local livelihoods. Most importantly, the blasting at the mine causes cracks in the houses of the neighborhood, forcing people to seek resettlement and compensation (IBGDH, 2019). This contestation has mainly played out at Lualaba's Relocation Commission. Interviewees stressed, however, that COMMUS has been hiding behind the Commission, which has been slow and weak in advocating on the local behalf. On some occasions, people managed to mobilize local politicians and Kolwezi-based NGOs more directly. This led to concessions, e.g. when COMMUS agreed to facilitate the relocation of 100 households, following pressure from local members of the regional parliament (Le Temps, 2021). In most instances, however, the company has refused fair compensation and new housing, let alone to create a buffer zone. The local and regional scope of the involved political and NGO actors has limited the power of this coalition.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, political and NGO support has been limited at the lowly responsive CDM-Chine. During the numerous strikes between 2019 and 2021, regional authorities and the labor inspection came in for mediation repeatedly. Ultimately, the Boké Governor sought to mediate an agreement in early 2021 yet soon withdrew from this role (Mosaïque Guinée, 2021). Hence, there has been a shortage of high-ranking elite support in this case. Guinean NGOs also have hardly monitored and exposed issues at CDM-Chine, and INGOs have been entirely absent. This lack of outside involvement partly results from the company's remote, rural location and smaller size, which has limited political, media, and NGO attention, especially compared to SMB and TFM. As a result, the striking workers and discontented local communities have remained largely isolated from outside support.

4.3. Reputational vulnerability

The companies' responsiveness also depends on their reputational

<sup>10</sup> Mining accounts for 46 % (DRC) and 30 % (Guinea) of the government revenue and nearly all export earnings in both countries (EITI, 2022a, EITI, 2022b).

<sup>11</sup> The scope changed recently as Amnesty International started reporting on COMMUS (Amnesty International & IBGDH, 2023).

risks, which are based on supply chain pressures, and which become amplified by transnational activists. We find higher responsiveness for the Chinese companies that provide minerals for global markets, which often end up in goods for concerned consumers in the West. These companies have strong business incentives for building and maintaining a positive reputation, also because they are exposed to transnational activists who often leverage on such reputational concerns (Sändig and Hönke, 2024). In contrast, Chinese state regulation for CSR is not yet a relevant source of reputational vulnerability in the examined cases. As mentioned, it is central SOEs and investments under the BRI, where China's regulation is stronger (IDI, 2019). The examined companies, however, belong to publicly-listed corporations (SMB, TFM, COMMUS) or provincial SOEs (CDM-Chine),<sup>12</sup> and none operates under the BRI. Hence, in our cases, only limited and voluntary guidance applies for social engagement, which resembles the low regulation of Western and other globally-operating miners.

CMOC, as parent company of TFM, is highly exposed to global markets, Western consumers, and transnational activism. Since the early 2010s, it transformed from a China-based into a globally operating miner. It now owns previously Western-held mines in Australia, Brazil, and the DRC, as well as the Geneva-based mineral trader IXM. CMOC derives half of its revenues from customers outside of China (CMOC, 2022, p. 267). Moreover, through TFM it runs the world's second largest operation for mining cobalt, which as a resource has a reputation for human rights abuses. INGOs have amplified the supply chain pressure of CMOC by linking cobalt mined under exploitative conditions at TFM with cars and electronic devices produced by major brands (including Apple, Samsung, and Tesla, see RAID and CAJJ, 2021). To prevent and address such challenges, TFM has provided significant community spending, continued the grievances complaint mechanism inherited from the previous owner Freeport, and regularly conceded to protesters' demands.

SMB's responsiveness can be similarly linked to supply chain and transnational activist pressure. It is the sole mining project of China Hongqiao, the world's second-largest aluminum producer. The company mainly supplies manufacturers of the automotive industry, such as CITIC Dicastal, the world's largest producer of aluminum wheels and chassis components. This makes SMB an indirect supplier of major Western brands (including Ford, Mercedes-Benz, and Toyota) – a supply chain link that HRW (2021) has exploited for challenging SMB. Similar to TFM, SMB has managed these reputational vulnerabilities through extensive social spending (about US\$ 4.4 million/year, see ITIE Guinée, 2022, p. 190). This includes concessions to local protesters and to the concerns raised by INGOs.

In contrast, the less responsive companies have fewer such global supply chain pressures and hence lower reputational vulnerability. These companies mainly supply customers and consumers within China. Although consumer awareness is rising in China, this remains limited to domestic social and environmental problems. Chinese NGOs also have hardly monitored such overseas' investment and they generally pursue 'embedded activism', in which they advise rather than overtly confront state and corporate actors (Waisbich, 2024). Hence, these companies face no risk of consumer boycotts, nor of public NGO actions at 'home.' Furthermore, given their limited connections to Western brands and markets, INGOs have engaged less on these companies than on SMB and TFM.

Zijin Mining, as parent of COMMUS, is a major international miner too but still has lower reputational vulnerability than CMOC and China Hongqiao. Zijin has expanded globally since the mid-2010s through acquisitions in Papua New Guinea, Serbia, and the DRC. It is China's largest gold and second-largest copper producer, yet the business still centers on China's domestic market. The company derives 80 % of its revenues from customers within China, especially through the Shanghai

Metal Exchange (Zijin Mining, 2022, p. 57). Providing only a fraction of CMOC/TFM's cobalt outputs (see Table 1), Zijin also has lower profile within the notorious cobalt sector. As a result, the company has long faced no transnational activism. Reputational vulnerabilities have been increasing though, especially since Zijin joined the World Gold Council in 2020. The company has also met resistance over its copper project in Serbia since 2022, and a first INGO report was issued on COMMUS lately (Amnesty International and IBDGH, 2023). So far, Zijin has responded to the rising pressure mainly by initiating public relations efforts. At COMMUS, it released more information on its operations and started to make media statements responding to complaints. While this is a relevant step towards responsiveness, we observed no increased readiness to concede to protesters yet.

CDM-Chine and its parent company CHICO have low reputational vulnerability. Based on a 2018 cooperation agreement, they mainly supply bauxite to China Zhongwang and Yidian Holding, two aluminum smelters and processors, for the domestic production of trains, aircraft, and marine vessels in China (Asian Metal, 2018). Through China Zhongwang, there were links with major Western automotive and aviation brands, but this accounted only for a small share of China Zhongwang's business, and the company went bankrupt in 2021. These limited international supply chain and brand linkages have curtailed transnational activism on CDM-Chine/CHICO. The companies' smaller size also reduced INGO attention: CDM-Chine is CHICO's only mining project, whereas Zijin and TFM operate broader portfolios, and China Hongqiao/SMB run a larger sole mine. Additionally, the business sector matters for the low responsiveness: being primarily a construction company, CHICO faces the typical cost pressure of this sector. CHICO cross-finances deficient construction projects through the income generated by CDM-Chine (Yang, 2019, p. 66). Hence, low reputational vulnerabilities, alongside financial constraints, explain why CDM-Chine has been highly reluctant to concede, particularly to costly worker demands for increased salary.

## 5. Conclusion

In sum, we find that the examined Chinese mining companies are far from generally unresponsive. In many instances, they conceded to community protests, striking workers, and issues raised by NGOs. Even artisanal miners, as a little organized protest actor, received substantial (if mostly tacit) concessions. The companies' level of responsiveness, however, differs based on three conditions that reflect the rationales we identified in the literature: the Chinese mining companies tend to concede if facing intense disruptive actions, significant pressure from state actors and NGOs, and reputational vulnerability based on global supply chain pressure and transnational activism.

Frequent and lasting disruptive actions that involve diverse sets of actors have pushed SMB and TFM into concessions, whereas the lowly responsive companies have faced less intense disruptions, overall. The balance sheet on violent means is mixed: while various instances of violent protests led to concessions, companies similarly conceded following non-violent actions. Relatedly, we find that companies and state actors often respond through repression, both following violent and non-violent protests, and even when companies offered concessions at the same time. These ambiguous findings potentially challenge the demonstrated higher effectiveness of non-violence from civil resistance studies (Chenoweth and Stephan, 2011). Pressure from outside political actors and NGOs, furthermore, increased the companies' responsiveness. In the less responsive cases, we observe rather limited and mostly local and regional political and civil society involvement, whereas the more responsive companies saw more extensive and higher level outside interventions.

Reputational vulnerabilities also prove relevant for the

<sup>12</sup> Zijin also has a provincial SOE as minority stakeholder.

responsiveness of Chinese mining companies. The companies that mainly supply China's domestic market remained significantly less responsive. They have lower reputational risks, also because they face less or no INGO activism at all. For most INGOs, it remains difficult to challenge these companies, which lack business links with Western brands and consumers (Hatte and Koenig, 2020). In contrast, the Chinese miners that are exposed to global markets, Western consumers, and INGO activism showed high responsiveness (Sändig and Hönke, 2024). Fearing bad press, which could hurt their business, these companies tend to concede more easily to activist challenges, both on the ground and transnationally.

In some regards, company size, location, and other case specifics also contribute to explain the different responsiveness. The companies operating particularly large mines have shown higher responsiveness. This partly results from the higher livelihood impacts and international visibility of these mines, which entails more intense disruptive actions and stronger political and NGO attention. The highly responsive TFM, furthermore, has a distinct history, where community engagement is also a legacy of the former Western owners, which the new Chinese management has continued.<sup>13</sup> Finally, CDM-Chine's low responsiveness also results from the company's remote and rural location, which limits community impacts and NGO attention, and from the extreme cost pressure of the parent companies' construction business.

By these findings, we contribute to research on the success conditions of contention against extractive projects (Scheidel et al., 2020; Walter and Wagner, 2021). We find that the prevailing rationalist theories, derived mainly from Western and other non-Chinese cases (Rutten et al., 2017; Steinberg, 2019), are similarly relevant for the responsiveness of Chinese mining companies. At the same time, we specify the existing research by highlighting a structural difference regarding reputational concerns: while reputational risks are generally high for Western-based investment projects (Frederiksen, 2018), they vary in the Chinese case, based on the companies' global market and related transnational activist exposure. Hence, Chinese miners that mainly cater to China's domestic market still have rather low incentives for reputation-building and hence concessions to protesters. This comes despite rising environmental awareness among the Chinese and China's efforts of mainstreaming responsible business conduct (IDI, 2019).

Our analysis opens opportunities for further research. Since we focused on autocratic contexts and lowly capable states, our findings are relevant mostly for such settings. In more democratic contexts, we would expect higher responsiveness overall and more formalized means of contention, particularly through litigation. Furthermore, company responses to more informal and small-scale means of contention (like everyday resistance, petitioning, and appeals to community liaison departments) need to be further studied. Relatedly, company internal decision-making processes (on concessions, repression, and other responses) have remained a 'black box' so far. Further research is also required on the role of state actors, both as co-owners but also supervising agencies (Bornschieer and Vogt, 2024). For both Chinese companies and their contestants still little is known about how they learn and adapt to each other's perceptions and practices over time. Lastly, it would be important to assess the responsiveness of small and medium sized Chinese miners too, where the incentive structures for concessions likely differ.

Finally, we want to highlight a normative limitation. The examined concessions benefit the communities, workers, and artisanal miners, yet most of their grievances have persisted. Even the responsive companies tended to insufficiently address the fundamental problems of their extractivist practices, such as pollution, insufficient job creation, and limited local development contributions (Hönke, 2014; Pegg, 2012). Hence, there is need for improvement, for strong activist voices, and for

better understanding corporate responsiveness, especially as a new wave of extractivism is underway for the green transformation.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Jan Sändig:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Jana Hönke:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Claude Kabemba:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Data curation.

### Declaration of competing interest

In his position as director of the NGO Southern Africa Resource Watch (SARW), Claude Kabemba has been involved in advocacy actions on TFM and COMMUS. SARW also worked with TFM for community consultations. Potential conflicts of interest that emanate from this have been considered when writing the paper. The remaining authors declare to have no conflicts of interest.

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<sup>13</sup> See also Rubbers (2020) on the layering of different historical legacies in company community relations.



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