



South Africa's Critical Minerals Balancing Energy Needs with Labour Rights

South Africa's mining industry has a growing role in the global energy transition, being a major producer of critical minerals such as chromium, manganese, platinum, titanium, and vanadium. These resources are vital for renewable energy technologies. In addition to its economic importance, the mining sector employs 477,000 workers. However, the quality of employment is questionable, particularly due to the high prevalence of subcontracting, which accounts for an estimated 25% of the sector's total workforce in the sector. Unfortunately, the current focus on just transition often neglects the workers indispensable for the extraction. Research by Profundo for CNV Internationaal reveals miners have to deal with hazardous working conditions, job insecurity and low wages, while being severely affected by the intensified resource extraction required for this energy shift. Key research findings, conclusions and recommendations are resumed below. CNV Internationaal aims to develop informed strategies to engage with upstream and downstream stakeholders, advocating for improved labour conditions throughout the mineral supply chain

Key Research Findings

1. Global Importance of South African Minerals

- South Africa accounts for 70-80% of global platinum supply, 59% of palladium, 25% of vanadium, and 19% of titanium minerals.
- It holds the largest global reserves of chromium and produces 17% of the world's manganese ore.



2. Labour Rights Violations

- Working conditions for mine workers remain harsh and dangerous, with dozens of workers dying in accidents each year and long-term health impacts like silicosis.
- A quarter of mining jobs are subcontracted, leading to job insecurity, lower wages, and limited benefits.
- Companies systematically resist unionisation through contract labour and anti-union practices.
- Female mine workers face very high levels of gender-based violence. Especially women who work underground, face verbal and physical sexual harassment and even rape at work. A pattern of 'sex for jobs' is also reported by multiple women.

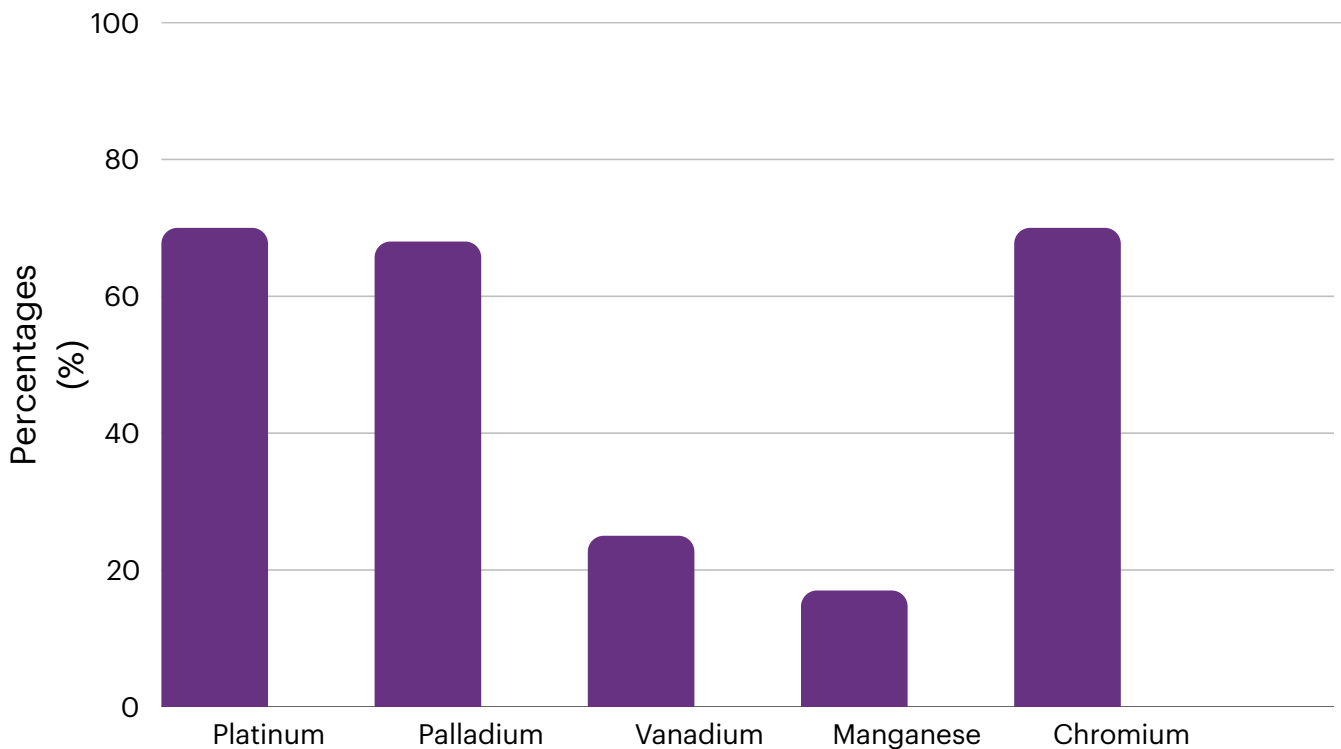
3. Social and Environmental Impacts

- Mining operations cause extensive water use, pollution, and risks like tailings dam failures.
- Communities near mines face displacement, environmental harm, and inadequate consultation processes.
- Women face systemic exclusion from job opportunities and decision-making roles.

4. Responsible business policy gaps

- While companies align responsible business policies with global standards, poor implementation, lack of gender sensitivity, and limited stakeholder engagement remain significant barriers.

South Africa's Contribution to Global Mineral Production



Conclusions

Energy Transition Minerals

South Africa's mining sector is indispensable for the renewable energy shift, yet labour and environmental practices undermine its potential for equitable and responsible development.

Labour Rights Crisis

Workers face unsafe conditions, low wages, and housing shortages, and women face gender based violence and harassment, compounded by systemic barriers to unionisation.

Environmental and Social Costs

Historical inequalities and ecological damage persist, disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups and local communities.

Regulatory Weaknesses

Inadequate enforcement of labour laws and environmental regulations allows ongoing violations.

Social Dialogue

Social dialogue attention is missing on the increasing resource extraction driven by the global energy transition risking human rights abuse and environmental harming practices

Recommendations

For Governments

- Strengthen enforcement of labour laws and environmental protections, including increasing inspectorate capacity.
- Promote inclusive consultations with communities, particularly women, in mining policy development.
- Address housing shortages through affordable housing initiatives in mining regions.

For Mining Companies

- Ensure occupational safety and reduce precarious employment practices.
- Enhance transparency in CSR initiatives.
- Promote safety for women and gender equality in the workplace.

For Downstream Buyers

- Mandate fair labour standards in supplier agreements and actively monitor compliance.
- Collaborate with NGOs and unions to support worker-led initiatives and strengthen due diligence.

For CNV Internationaal and Trade Unions

- Strengthen collective bargaining.
- Advocate for stronger international enforcement of labour standards.
- Support capacity-building for local unions.
- Address gender-related issues:
- Utilize tools like the Fair Work Monitor to identify and address labour rights risks.

Social dialogue is key to securing a just and sustainable transition for all

Historically, mining in South Africa is associated with human and labour rights violations, environmental degradation, and social conflict. These days, it demands a new approach. A renewed social contract—based on equity, justice, and inclusion—is essential to ensure fair outcomes for workers, communities, and all stakeholders. Social dialogue, within frameworks like the Presidential Climate Commission’s Just Transition Plan or the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) processes, is key to preventing past mistakes and securing a just and sustainable transition for all. CNV Internationaal believes social dialogue is indispensable to just transition, as much as is the case in other conditions of employment in the workplace. [Learn more on: cnvinternationaal.nl/socialdialogue](https://cnvinternationaal.nl/socialdialogue)

Our approach

Over the past years, CNV Internationaal has made considerable efforts to contribute to improving the situation of workers in the mining value chain and the related labour rights risks they are facing. In Latin America, this has, among others, resulted in the establishment of a fair work monitor. We analysed current cases, we share good practices and develop proposals. For example a collective project has been launched in the field of occupational health and safety in Peru and Bolivia, together with European metal companies and global metals associations. CNV Internationaal aspires to extend its work to improve the labour rights of mining workers in South Africa.



More information

To download the report, watch the webinar and learn more on our approach to a Just Transition just scan the QR code or go to on our website: www.cnvinternationaal.nl/mining



Who we are and what we do

CNV Internationaal, for 100% fair work

100% Fair work, that is what CNV Internationaal is working for every day in Africa, Asia and Latin America. We do this by working together closely with local partner trade unions and by investing in good cooperation with other partners, such as companies and governments. Fair work means that people can work safely and in all freedom, earning a living wage. Freedom of association and social dialogue are important conditions for achieving this.

100% Fair Work means that women and young people have the same opportunities on the labour market as everyone else: no discrimination in working conditions, on wages, etc.

100% Fair Work also entails that we investigate the safety, health and freedom of workers. For this, CNV Internationaal and its partner trade unions make use of innovative tools such as our Fair Work Monitor an accessible, digital survey. To know exactly what is going on with workers strengthens our position at the negotiating tables. Moreover, it enables us to measure improvements and the impact of our work.

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