



Securing Critical Minerals or Securing People? Security Governance and Canada-Africa Relations in the Just Energy Transition

Benjamin Ofosu-Atuahene
Queen's University

J. Andrew Grant
Queen's University

Olusola Ogunnubi
Queen's University

Introduction

The global race for critical minerals is often presented as a straightforward supply-and-demand challenge. Governments in North America, Europe, and Asia are searching for reliable sources of cobalt, lithium, graphite, copper, nickel, rare earth elements, and other minerals needed to manufacture electric vehicles, batteries, windmills, and other renewable energy components – essential for clean energy technologies – as well as components for advanced defence systems. Yet beneath the language of clean energy, green growth, and supply-chain resilience lies a more uncomfortable question: who bears most of the human security costs that underpin the critical mineral supply chains that make the just energy transition possible?

The answer matters because the future of the just energy transition – also known as the green transition – will not be determined solely by technological innovation, climate obligation, investment flows including sustainable finance funds, or the speed at which new mines and transport corridors are developed. It will also be shaped by how security is governed across the mineral-rich regions that supply the world's critical mineral resources. As the International Energy Agency notes,¹ the production and processing of many critical minerals are highly concentrated geographically, increasing the strategic importance of mineral-rich regions and the governance challenges associated with extraction. In Africa, where many of these minerals are concentrated, security is becoming one of the defining political questions of the just energy transition. The challenge is no longer simply how to extract critical minerals, but whose security is prioritized in the process.

For Canada, this question of whose security is prioritized is steadily coming to the fore as it seeks to boost domestic production and increase its presence in global supply chains of critical minerals. Canada's Critical Minerals Strategy² recognizes the importance of good governance and good practices in conjunction with critical minerals as being central to clean technology, economic and military security, and diversified global supply chains – reinforced by its leadership on the latter as part of the critical mineral file under the auspices of the 2025 and 2026 G7 meetings. As governments seek



The Centre for
International and Defence Policy

138 Union Street, Suite 403, Queen's University,
Kingston, Ontario Canada K7L 3N6

cidp@queensu.ca

to diversify supply chains and reduce dependence on dominant suppliers, Africa's mineral wealth³ has become increasingly significant to efforts to secure clean-energy supply chains and reduce geopolitical vulnerability. The African Union's African Green Minerals Strategy (AGMS) aims to transform Africa from serving as a mere exporter of critical minerals to developing processing and other value-added services in global supply chains. The latter offers gainful employment opportunities for local communities and other residents of African exporter countries. Canada is seeking a similar path, for job opportunities in the processing and value-added segments of critical mineral supply chains for members of Indigenous communities and other residents of remote parts of the country. Given such alignments of interests, Canadian and African state and non-state actors are well situated to serve as norm leaders to promote good practices in critical mineral supply chains including security governance.

Critical Minerals, Supply Chains, and Security Governance

Treating critical minerals as a supply-chain logistics challenge risks narrowing the policy conversation, and, ultimately, the prospects for governance success. A diverse and secure supply chain should not be measured solely by the number of primary and back-up suppliers to ensure the uninterrupted movement of critical minerals from mines to processors and manufacturers to consumers. It should also be evaluated according to whether affected producing communities have meaningful opportunities to participate in governance processes, whether security providers are subject to transparency measures for public oversight, and whether rights of local communities are protected alongside commercial interests. Furthermore, if policymakers define security mainly as the protection of mines, transport corridors, investment flows, and corporate personnel, then the just energy transition will reproduce many of the exclusions that have long shaped extractive economies across the globe.

In Africa, governments, mining companies, private security providers, local communities, and international actors are increasingly involved in managing access to mineral-rich territories. This has produced complex security arrangements that extend far beyond traditional state policing. In many cases, security governance⁴ is shared across public and private actors responsible for protecting mines, transportation corridors, processing facilities, and investment projects.

These arrangements are not simply technical responses to insecurity. They shape who has access to land, who benefits from extraction, whose claims are recognized, and whose livelihoods are treated as obstacles to development. Security, in this sense, is not politically neutral. It is a form of governance entangled with the outcome of the just energy transition.

African actors are also not merely passive recipients of these developments. Governments, local communities, artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) participants, civil society organizations (CSOs), and security providers actively shape how critical mineral governance operates on the ground. Across the continent, security arrangements are continuously negotiated, contested, and reinterpreted by actors seeking to influence who benefits from extraction and who bears its costs. Understanding how good practices can generate critical mineral governance, therefore, requires recognizing Africa not simply as a supplier of

strategic resources, but as a site where the norms,⁵ conventions, and rules of the just energy transition are being actively shaped.

These dynamics are particularly visible in Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Although their security systems differ, both reveal a common pattern. Security resources are frequently directed toward protecting extraction, infrastructure, and investment, while the rights and livelihoods of local communities receive less attention. Scholarly analyses have shown that in practice, the protection of mining personnel, transportation corridors, and strategic assets often takes precedence over the concerns of ASM participants, land users, and host communities whose lives are directly affected by extractive sector activities.⁶

In Angola, private security in extractive sectors has historically been closely linked to political and military elites. Research by Christopher Kinsey and Andreas Krieg⁷ shows how commercial security providers became embedded in a broader patrimonial security complex, where the protection of mineral extraction was tied to elite authority and political control. Angola's relevance is also growing because of its position in regional infrastructure politics. The Lobito Corridor,⁸ connecting critical mineral-rich areas of Central Africa to Angola's Atlantic coast, has become a major focus of Western-backed efforts to diversify their critical mineral supply routes.

Yet infrastructure projects do not exist in a political vacuum. They create new incentives to secure transportation networks, mining sites and areas surrounding the mining concessions, and investment environments. In contexts where security is already tied to elite power or corporate protection, these incentives can deepen existing inequalities unless accountability and community participation are built into the mining project design.

The DRC presents a different but equally important picture. As one of the world's most important cobalt producers, the country sits at the centre of the global energy transition.⁹ Yet security governance in its mining regions is fragmented and contested. Mining companies, private security providers, public security forces, ASM participants, national and local political authorities, and CSOs all shape the governance of extraction. In some cases, ASM participants and local communities face displacement,¹⁰ criminalization, or restricted access to critical mineral-rich land. Despite such threats to human security, communities continue to resist, negotiate, protest, and organize in response to exclusionary governance arrangements.

The contrast between Angola and the DRC is important. Angola illustrates a more centralized and elite-controlled security arrangement. The DRC illustrates a more fragmented and contested one. But both point to the same underlying problem: security is often organized around stabilizing extraction rather than protecting communities. It begs the question of whether the existing governance models – where corporate interests and market forces are often prioritized – are sufficient to deliver a just energy transition that is inclusive, decolonized,¹¹ and equitable to residents of critical mineral producer and consumer countries alike. The implications of this question are examined below.

Policy Implications

For policymakers, the implications are as follows. Critical mineral governance must move beyond narrow understandings of security that focus only on infrastructure, investment, and supply-chain continuity. A just energy transition requires asking the questions of who is protected, who is excluded, and who has the authority to define security in the first place.

First, governments and international partners should treat security governance as a core part of just energy transition planning. Security arrangements should not be added after investment decisions have already been made. They should be assessed from the beginning of project design, especially where mines, railways, ports, processing facilities, and transport corridors affect local land use and livelihoods.

Second, community participation must be built into critical mineral projects in a meaningful way. Consultation should not be reduced to a procedural requirement after major decisions have already been taken. Affected communities should have opportunities to shape decisions about land access, compensation, grievance mechanisms, environmental protections, and the role of security providers. Without this, projects may appear stable from the perspective of investors while generating insecurity for the people living closest to extraction.

Third, private and public security providers operating in extractive regions should be subject to stronger transparency and oversight. This includes clearer reporting on who provides security, who pays for it, what rules govern its conduct, and what mechanisms exist when abuses occur. If security is partly outsourced to private actors, then accountability cannot remain vague or informal.

Fourth, supply-chain risk assessments should include local political and social risks, not only logistical or geopolitical ones. Displacement, livelihood loss, land conflict, community resistance, and weak accountability should be treated as central risks to long-term supply-chain resilience. Projects that ignore local grievances may generate instability rather than reduce it.

Fifth, Canada should engage African governments, local communities, and civil society actors as governance partners rather than simply suppliers, beneficiaries, or affected populations. Canada's new foreign policy outlook for Africa, outlined in the Canada-Africa Strategy,¹² already presents the framework for Ottawa to build a trusted partnership by supporting an inclusive security governance process among diverse stakeholders in mining countries, communities, and companies within Africa. In this blueprint, Canada commits to protecting and reinforcing shared interests that address human security challenges – while strengthening accountability and governance standards.

Concluding Remarks

Africa's role in the just energy transition is not limited to the possession of critical minerals. African actors – both state and non-state varieties – are actively shaping the political conditions under which those minerals are extracted, transported, contested, and governed. Any serious approach to promoting good practices as part of the governance of critical minerals and their supply chains must take that agency seriously.

For Canada, these issues are directly relevant to its broader efforts diversify its roster of trading partners. And, more specifically, as Ottawa seeks to strengthen critical mineral partnerships

and reduce strategic dependencies, it should avoid treating supply-chain security as a purely technical or geopolitical matter. Making good on its reputation in international opinion surveys as an actor with a positive impact on international affairs, Canada can engage Africa as a mutually trusted and ‘equal’ partner – including via commercial linkages care of African diasporas residing in Canada – an attractive alternative to Canada’s rivals in the race for access to the continent’s critical minerals. This is reinforced by the Canada-Africa Strategy, which holds Ottawa and Canadian exporters and investors in Africa to greater governance standards in the sustainable production of critical minerals – especially when it overlaps with security concerns of host communities. Long-term, stable, and secure access to critical minerals depends on political legitimacy as much as logistical efficiency. Supply chains that are efficient – but socially contested by host communities of mining activities – are not truly secure.

The just energy transition is often presented as a challenge that ‘green’ technologies can address. In reality, it is more than a climate change challenge; it is also a governance challenge. The future of critical mineral supply chains will depend not only on where resources are located, but on how competing claims over security, justice, and development are negotiated.

The central question to address is therefore not simply how to secure critical minerals, but whose security the just energy transition is ultimately designed to serve. A just energy transition that protects critical minerals while marginalizing the communities living closest to the areas where they are extracted may be ‘green’ at first glance, but, upon further reflection, could not be described as just.

Benjamin Ofosu-Atuahene is an award-winning Doctoral Candidate in International Relations and Comparative Politics at Queen’s University. His research lies at the intersection of international relations, international security, and international political economy, with interests in security governance, the privatization of security, private security actors, and resource politics in Africa. Drawing on insights from African politics and Global North-Global South relations, he examines how states, firms, communities, and security actors negotiate and contest authority, legitimacy, and security in resource-rich regions. He holds an MA (Political Science) from Dalhousie University and a BA-HONS (Political Science with Philosophy) from the University of Ghana.

J. Andrew Grant is an Associate Professor of Political Studies at Queen’s University and a Senior Fellow with the Centre for International and Defence Policy. For more than two decades, Dr. Grant has conducted high-level scholarly and policy-oriented research – based on extensive fieldwork across Africa – on critical minerals and other natural resource governance issues. In 2009, Dr. Grant was the first political scientist to receive an Early Researcher Award from the Government of Ontario’s Ministry of Research and Innovation. He has also advised industry, civil society organizations, and Canadian, American, British, German, and Sierra Leonean policymakers.

Olusola Ogunnubi is a Doctoral Candidate at Queen’s University and a Researcher with the Centre for International and Defence Policy. His research focuses on the governance of critical minerals and other natural resources, clean technology governance, and regional power dynamics. Ogunnubi holds a Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship Doctoral Award and the Flight 302 Legacy Award. Ogunnubi was a Lecturer at the School of Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal (2011-2014) and affiliated with the German Institute for Global and Area Studies. He has authored several journal articles and co-authored *Nigeria’s Border Diplomacy: Power and Hegemony in Africa* (Routledge, 2026).

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