POLICY BRIEF

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BEYOND RAW EXPORTS

Advancing Value Addition as a Strategy for Preventing Violent Conflict and Extremism in Africa

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Africa is a major global supplier of mineral resources and critical inputs that drive industrial systems worldwide, yet it remains among the most conflict-affected and economically marginalised regions. Paradoxically, many of the countries endowed with mineral resources are also those most affected by poverty, violent conflict, and extremism. This contradiction is not accidental but structural, and it is further exacerbated by a renewed global scramble for Africa's critical minerals.

This policy brief, distilled from the SACMEP/ISPS webinar "Beyond Raw Exports: Advancing Value Addition as a Strategy for Preventing Violent Conflict and Extremism in Africa," argues that the continued export of raw, unprocessed mineral resources is not merely an economic limitation but a direct driver of youth radicalisation, community grievances and violent extremism across the continent. The brief identifies the systemic exclusion of local communities from mineral resource governance as a central policy gap. It calls on African governments, civil society, and development partners to act urgently across seven interconnected priority areas.

The insights presented draw on contributions from distinguished panellists, practitioners and participants representing Nigeria, Kenya, South Sudan, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and China.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- Raw mineral resources extraction often displaces artisanal miners and farmers, creating economic grievances that fuel community tensions and youth radicalisation, particularly among unemployed populations affected by irresponsible extractive practices.
- Mineral resources value addition through local processing generates employment, builds domestic wealth and reduces conditions that contribute to poverty, violent conflict and extremism.
- Governance gaps, opaque licensing systems and corruption enable multinational corporations to extract wealth while local communities remain impoverished.
- There is a direct relationship between Africa's rising debt burden and conflict in resource-rich contexts, as some countries increasingly exchange mineral concessions for debt servicing or security arrangements. Africa's external debt has more than doubled over the past decade to over $1 trillion by 2024, with at least 20 low-income countries at high risk of debt distress, undermining state capacity and fuelling instability.
- Many African countries lack robust policy frameworks for value addition, reflecting decades of limited industrial policy learning and weak intra-continental cooperation on mineral processing.
- Partnerships with industrialised countries, including China, present opportunities for technological advancement and industrial development, but must be structured transparently and equitably.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- African countries must strengthen the regulation of natural resources extraction through transparent and competitive tendering processes.
- Mandating local value addition and enforceable community benefit-sharing mechanisms in all extraction contracts is essential to safeguard communities from extraction without reparation.
- Formalising artisanal miners into legally recognised and supported cooperatives genuinely builds trust, provides a structured pathway to grievance redress and environmental accountability.
- Institutionalising meaningful civil society participation in resource governance and policy processes.
- Investing significantly in STEM education and technical skills development to build domestic industrial capacity.
- Establishing an Association of African Mineral-Producing Countries to strengthen collective bargaining power.
- Prioritising debt restructuring and fiscal sovereignty to enhance negotiating leverage with external partners.
- Investing in technology transfer to advance modernisation and industrialisation.

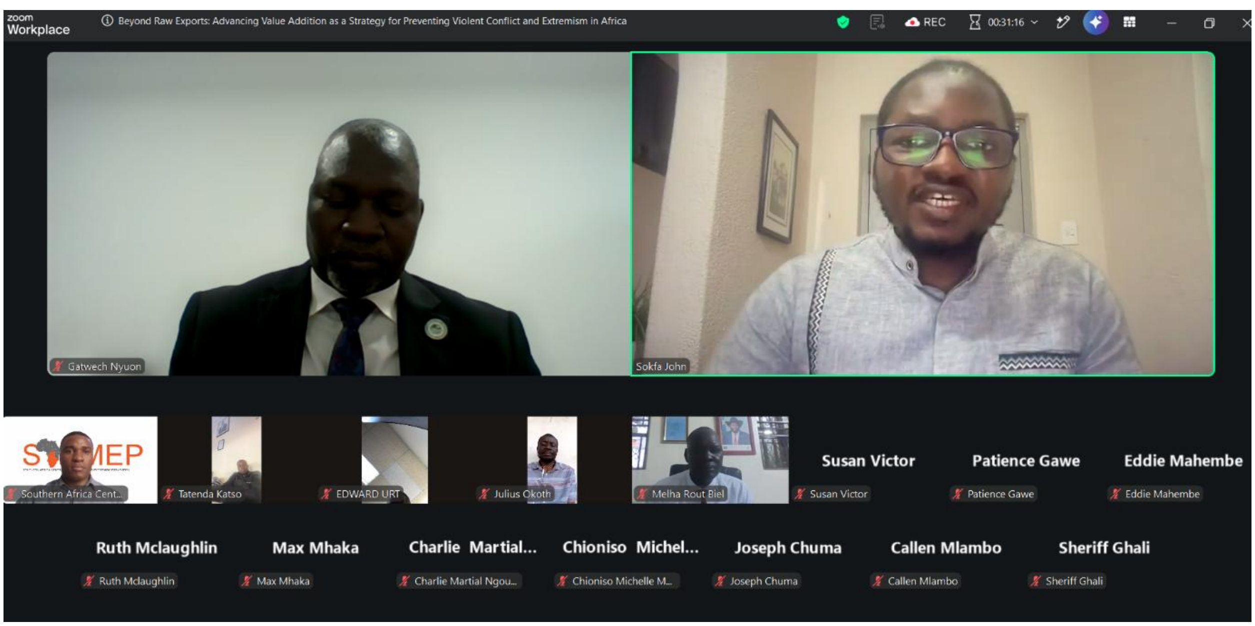

Figure 1: SACMEP/ISPS webinar participants screenshot, 04 June 2026

1. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Africa is currently experiencing a significant rise in violent conflict and extremism. By early 2026, more than 50 armed conflicts were ongoing across the continent, with over 35 million people displaced (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2025). This situation is compounded by a surge in violent extremism and terrorism. The Global Terrorism Index 2026 identifies Africa as the most affected region, with the Sahel as the epicentre. The region accounted for more than half of all terrorism-related deaths in 2025, with six African countries ranking among the ten most affected globally: Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Mali, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Future for Advanced Research and Studies, 2026).

While these conflicts are often framed in ideological terms, a growing body of evidence links them to mineral resource exploitation, particularly within the extractive sector (Olaoye et al, 2025). As the global demand for critical minerals used in batteries, electronics and renewable technologies intensifies, the risks of political instability and violent conflict in Africa are likely to increase. Existing literature consistently indicates a correlation between mineral resource endowment and the occurrence of conflict, although the nature and strength of this relationship vary across contexts (Schellens, 2023).

For example, Olaoye et al. (2025) argue that mineral resources do not directly cause conflict; rather, income inequality mediates this relationship. This suggests that where benefits from mineral resources extraction are distributed inequitably, the likelihood of conflict increases. Similarly, Adinoyi (2018) observes that in both Middle East and North African (MENA) and Sub-Saharan Africa, it is the lack of equitable socioeconomic benefits from mineral resources, across both upstream governance and downstream community levels, which catalyses violent extremism.

Many of the world's untapped mineral resources are located in politically unstable countries, where weak governance allows armed groups to exploit these resources to finance prolonged conflicts (World Bank, 2015). The Democratic Republic of Congo is a classic example where, for instance, the M23 group generates approximately US$300,000 per month from mineral resources exploitation to sustain their ongoing conflict (ISS-PSC Report, 2025).

However, it is important to emphasise that mineral resource wealth does not inherently lead to violence. Conflict typically arises where such wealth intersects with weak institutions, poor governance, and the presence of armed groups. Botswana, one of the world's leading producers of diamonds by value, has maintained political stability largely due to its strong democratic governance (Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, 2025). Similarly, Namibia is highly politically stable despite being richly endowed with natural resources. Governance quality is therefore a critical determinant of whether resource wealth contributes to stability or conflict.

It is within this context that this policy brief advances mineral resource value addition as a strategic pathway for preventing violent conflict and extremism in Africa. Value addition in mineral resources refers to the local processing and refining of raw minerals into higher-value products, rather than exporting them in unprocessed form.

1.1 Africa's Mineral Resource Landscape

Approximately 40 to 45 African countries produce critical minerals essential for the global transition to green energy, electric vehicles, and advanced technologies (Dorsouma, 2024). The continent holds substantial reserves of cobalt, lithium, gold, diamonds, platinum and oil, resources that are increasingly central to the global economy. However, the overwhelming majority of these mineral resources are exported in raw form for processing in industrialised countries. They are transformed into high-value products and often sold back to African markets at significantly higher prices.

The continent's reliance on primary commodity exports entrenches vulnerability to global price fluctuations, limits industrialisation and constrains the development of local technical capacity. Nigeria, for example, despite being one of Africa's largest oil producers, continues to import refined petroleum products due to inadequate domestic refining capacity.

Africa's debt burden is also increasingly being tied to mineral resources. By the end of 2024 African external debt was more than $1 trillion compared to more than $500 billion in 2020 (UNDP-Ethiopia, 2025). In 2025 alone, African countries spent approximately $101.3 billion on external debt servicing. This debt burden is not only a fiscal challenge, but also a conflict driver: debt servicing diverts resources from essential public services, generating grievances against the state. In 2024, "28 African countries spent more on debt servicing than health, and 10 countries spent more on debt servicing than education" (Harcourt et al. 2025).

2. THE PROBLEM: HOW RAW EXTRACTION FUELS CONFLICT AND EXTREMISM

There are four major issues associated with raw minerals extraction and violent conflict and extremism in Africa. These include economic marginalisation, displacement of artisanal miners, state absence or complicit abandonment and radicalisation of young people.

Economic Marginalisation

Economic marginalisation exists when people who rightfully or previously profited from existing mineral resources extraction are removed or stopped from access and benefitting. Before multinational corporations arrive, local communities, particularly the youth, often sustain their livelihoods through artisanal mining. These informal miners, typically between the ages of 18 and 40, collect and sell minerals as a primary source of income. When extraction licenses are granted to foreign corporations or political elites, artisanal miners are frequently criminalised and forcibly excluded from the very land that has sustained them for generations.

As Julius Okoth, social justice activist and coordinator of the Kenyans for Tax Justice movement, explained: "... immediately, when those rare earths or drilling royalties start... government usually brings multinationals to come and start to drill or to extract those minerals... they take away the income that the youths of that area were relying on." The result is a predictable spiral: dispossession, economic desperation and radicalisation.

> *"immediately, when those rare earths or drilling royalties start... government usually brings multinationals to come and start to drill or to extract those minerals... they take away the income t hat the youths of that area were relying on"*
>
> **— Julius Okoth, Kenyans for Tax Justice**

Governance Voids and State Absence

contributes to violent extremism, especially when people feel extremely vulnerable and begin looking for alternatives to access service delivery, protection and safety. Across Africa, resource-rich regions frequently exhibit the sharpest contradictions between mineral wealth and community poverty. This is not coincidence; it reflects deliberate governance failures that prioritise opaque licensing deals with foreign corporations over the welfare of local populations.

During the webinar, Dr. Gatwech K. Nyuon described a telling example from South Sudan, where policy mandates that a certain percentage of oil revenue be allocated to local community development. However, "you don't see a school, you don't see a hospital, you don't see infrastructure. Because this percentage goes to a few individuals who are politicians who felt that they represent the community, but in real sense, community are not getting anything." It is this pervasive absence of state presence, coupled with a deep sense of marginalization and neglect that creates conditions in which extremism is more likely to take root across parts of Africa.

> *"You don't see a school, you don't see a hospital, you don't see infrastructure... Because this percentage goes to a few individuals who are politicians of that area..."*
>
> **— Dr. Gatwech K. Nyuon**

Displacement of Artisanal and Small-Scale Miners

Displacement of artisanal miners and small-scale miners is unequivocally one of the most direct triggers of localised violent conflict and extremism. When mineral extraction companies take over resource-rich areas, artisanal miners lose both their livelihoods and their identity as economic actors. The absence of any formal alternative—including cooperatives, licensing pathways, employment in processing facilities—leaves artisanal miners with few options beyond joining armed resistance movements or accepting recruitment by extremist organisations.

Julius Okoth drew a direct line between this kind of displacement and well-known conflicts: ***"This is what we can see also in what's happening with the Ogoni***

people, the story of Ken Saro-Wiwa in the Nigerian Delta." Ken Saro-Wiwa was a prominent Nigerian writer, environmentalist and human rights activist who led a peaceful campaign against the devastating ecological damage and economic marginalisation of the Ogoni people in the oil-rich Niger Delta, "he was killed by the people whose interests he challenged" (Global Justice Now, 2015). The pattern of artisanal miner displacement and radicalisation repeats across African states including in the Sahel region, in the DRC, Mozambique's Cabo Delgado and beyond.

Youth Radicalisation

Youth radicalisation within mining communities must be best understood as a direct manifestation of unresolved socio-economic grievances. When economic pathways are foreclosed, when their land is exploited without local participation or benefit, and when governments are seen as complicit in that exploitation, young people become susceptible to recruitment by armed groups that offer both income and a narrative of resistance.

> *"Extremism is not primarily a religious issue, but an economic one. It is the economic factor that brings the issue of extremism."*
>
> **— Julius Okoth**

Michelle Chioniso Murinda further reinforced this perspective with structural evidence arguing that external geopolitical actors frequently capitalise on these entrenched grievances. Through proxy engagements, they escalate localised economic grievances into broader insurgencies, thereby exacerbating instability in already fragile states.

> *"What we witness today—the chaos, the coups, the extremist violence—they are not random acts. These are symptoms, not causes. Beneath the surface lies a nexus of unsustainable debt, extractive economics, and a persistent erosion of bargaining power. To prevent conflict, we must treat these underlying pathologies."*
>
> **— Michelle Chioniso Murinda**

3. THE CASE FOR VALUE ADDITION IN PEACEBUILDING AND PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT

When mineral-rich countries export raw ores or concentrates with minimal local processing, they lose opportunities for industrialisation, employment creation and greater domestic revenue. However, in terms of peace and security, lack of value addition creates conditions for socio-economic grievances that may transform into violent conflict and instability in the long term.

3.1 Economic Benefits and Job Creation

Value addition fundamentally transforms every country's economic landscape by creating industries that come with jobs. Processing facilities require skilled and semi-skilled labour, creating employment opportunities for local youth at precisely the point in the economic chain where their exclusion currently breeds the most resentment—an ingredient for violence and conflict. High unemployment rates are a direct cause of youth recruitment, radicalisation and involvement in armed violence (Future for Advanced Research and Studies, 2026).

Hence, when a country exports processed copper rather than raw ore, or refined petroleum rather than crude oil, the retained economic value multiplies, giving the country capacity to support youth, local communities and general local development initiatives, which is essential for peace promotion. Countries like Zimbabwe, Botswana, Uganda, and Kenya have already begun restricting raw mineral exports, recognising that local processing is both an economic strategy and an employment creation tool.

> *"When there is value addition, there are some processes and those processes make it very easy for those companies to employ the youth."*
>
> **— Julius Okoth**

3.2 Reducing Extremism Through Economic Inclusion

The logic is direct: economically included communities do not radicalise. When youth have viable livelihoods, when communities see tangible benefits from resources extracted from their land, and when citizens feel that governance systems are transparent and accountable, the appeal of extremist organisations diminishes dramatically. Dr. Sokfa John summarised this connection clearly, identifying increased youth employment and the formalisation of artisanal mining as primary indicators that value addition is successfully preventing conflict.

3.3 Lessons from China

The example of China's industrial transformation was invoked repeatedly throughout the webinar as both inspiration and caution. In 1980, China's gross domestic product (GDP) was comparable to many African nations. Through disciplined governance, massive investment in science and technology, strategic partnerships and a relentless focus on industrialisation, China transformed itself into the world's leading manufacturing economy within four decades.

> *"China was able to learn from others. China learned from the United States. China learned from the United Kingdom. China has been sponsoring its citizens to go outside China and learn."*
>
> **— Professor Sheriff Ghali Ibrahim**

The lesson for Africa is not dependence on China, but the adoption of a similar development model of strategic learning, technology acquisition, and domestic industrialisation. China's Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) has already extended zero-tariff policies to 33 African countries for specific goods. However, Africa must produce those goods in sufficient quantities and quality to take advantage of these opportunities.

> *"What we can learn from China is how to govern ourselves by bringing leadership that is accountable."*
>
> **— Professor Dr. Melha Rout Biel**

4. INDICATORS OF SUCCESS IN MINERAL RESOURCES VALUE ADDITION

When value addition has been implemented, there has to be a progressive monitoring and evaluation process to assess if the process is genuinely benefiting local communities and the country broadly, to reduce conflict and violence. The following are indicators that can reflect value addition for peacebuilding measures. Without these measures, value addition risks reinforcing violence and conflict drivers.

Table 1: People-centred Minerals Value Addition Indicators

Indicator	Description
Increased youth employment	A measurable rise in local youth employed in extraction-related processing and manufacturing industries in resource-rich regions.
Formalisation of artisanal mining	Successful transition of informal artisanal miners into legally recognised, government-registered cooperatives with access to legal markets.
Reduction in militancy and sabotage	Decline in attacks on extraction infrastructure, armed insurgency in resource-rich regions and recruitment by extremist organisations in affected communities.
Restored social contracts	Evidence of active citizen participation in licensing processes, with communities reporting that their grievances are heard and that they are benefiting economically from resource extraction on their land.
Intra-African trade growth	Measurable increase in trade in processed goods between African countries, reflecting growing manufacturing capacity and regional economic integration.
Reduction in illicit financial flows	Greater transparency in extraction contracts and corporate tax compliance, reducing the revenue lost through opaque supply chains and illicit flows.

5. KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Nationalisation and Transparent Licensing

African governments must either transparently nationalise the extraction of critical natural resources with accountability or implement rigorously transparent and open tendering processes. The current system, in which opaque licensing agreements are concluded between governments and foreign corporations without citizen knowledge or participation, is the primary engine of corruption and conflict. Specifically, African governments must:

- Establish open, publicly accessible tender processes for all mineral resources extraction licenses.
- Publish the terms of all extraction agreements, including royalty rates, environmental obligations and community benefit provisions.
- Explore models of state participation in extraction enterprises, similar to Venezuela's nationalisation approach, to ensure that resource revenues flow to the public rather than exclusively to private foreign capital.

2. Mandate Local Value Addition

No new extraction license should be granted without a legally binding requirement that the extracting company build and operate local processing facilities, employ local youth, and contribute a meaningful percentage of revenues directly to affected communities. Specifically, governments must:

- Legislate against the export of unprocessed raw minerals.
- Require extraction contracts to include timelines for the development of local beneficiation and processing capacity.
- Impose progressively higher export levies on raw unprocessed minerals to create financial incentives for in-country processing.

3. Formalise Artisanal Mining into Cooperatives

Artisanal miners are not a problem to be eliminated; they are an economic asset to be organised. Governments must create legal pathways for artisanal and small-scale miners to form and register cooperatives, giving them recognised legal status, access to finance and the ability to participate formally in the extraction economy. Specifically, African governments must:

- Develop national frameworks for artisanal mining cooperatives with simplified registration requirements.
- Provide technical assistance, equipment and access to markets for registered cooperatives.
- Reserve specific extraction zones for artisanal cooperatives where appropriate, protecting them from displacement by large corporations.

4. Enshrine Community Participation

Citizens must have the right to information about and meaningful participation in decisions about resource extraction on their land. This is both a governance imperative and a conflict prevention strategy. Communities that feel heard and that benefit economically from extraction do not radicalise. Specifically, governments should:

- Facilitate free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) processes for all extraction projects affecting indigenous and local communities.
- Create independent monitoring agencies, insulated from government and corporate influence, to oversee community benefit obligations.
- Formally integrate civil society organisations into policy-making and oversight bodies for resource governance.

> *"Civil society should not give up. You should advocate for what you believe is very important, because your advocacy is the result of what you see from the society — you are the voice of the people."*
>
> **— Dr. Gatwech K. Nyuon**

5. Invest Massively in STEM Education and Technical Training

Africa cannot industrialise without the human capital to operate and innovate in industrial and technological environments. The current educational emphasis on social sciences and humanities, at the expense of STEM, leaves the continent structurally dependent on foreign technical expertise. Specifically, African governments must:

- Reform national curricula from primary school upward to embed technology literacy and STEM skills.
- Establish government-funded scholarship programmes to send students to partner nations, including China, to study engineering, industrial science, and manufacturing.
- Create domestic research and development funds to support technological innovation in extractive industries.
- Develop partnerships with China and other industrialised nations for co-production arrangements that include mandatory technology transfer.

6. Establish an Association of African Mineral-Producing Countries

Individual African countries are perpetually outmanoeuvred in negotiations with large multinational corporations and geopolitical actors. Collective bargaining power is essential. The creation of an association of African mineral-producing countries, modelled on OPEC, to negotiate collectively and establish minimum standards for extraction agreements can strengthen Africa's value addition position. Specifically, African governments must:

- Establish a continental body of mineral-producing nations under the African Union framework.
- Develop common minimum standards for extraction contracts, royalty rates, environmental protections, and community benefit obligations.
- Coordinate a common African position at international forums on critical minerals and green energy transition.

7. Address the Debt Crisis and Restore Fiscal Sovereignty

Africa's crushing external debt burden—over $1 trillion—is not merely an economic problem. It is a conflict driver that strips states of the fiscal space needed to provide services, invest in development and resist the extractive demands of creditors. Debt restructuring and the pursuit of greater fiscal sovereignty are therefore directly relevant to conflict and extremism prevention. To this end, African governments must:

- Engage in coordinated debt renegotiation and restructuring through the African Union and relevant multilateral bodies.
- Reject resource-backed loan arrangements that tie revenue streams to debt repayment before community benefit obligations are met.
- Build domestic revenue mobilisation capacity to reduce dependence on external borrowing.

6. CONCLUSION

The violence, coups, and extremist insurgencies that scar Africa's landscape are not random acts of savagery. They are symptoms of a structural condition—of a continent whose extraordinary natural wealth is systematically extracted and exported without adequate benefit to the people who live above it. The pathway from this condition to peace and prosperity runs directly through value addition.

While the solution to prevent resource-driven conflicts is clear, what is required is the political will to act and where political will is absent, it is the role of civil society, academia, practitioners and platforms like SACMEP to advocate, document, and demand accountability until that 'will' materialises.

SACMEP AND ISPS' CALL TO ACTION

To African governments: Nationalise or transparently regulate extraction; mandate value addition; invest in STEM education; and enshrine community participation in resource governance.
To civil society: Advocate relentlessly for transparency in licensing, community rights, and environmental accountability. Do not be silenced.
To the African Union: Establish a collective association of mineral-producing countries and develop continent-wide minimum standards for extraction agreements.
To development partners: Support debt restructuring, technology transfer, and capacity-building that genuinely empowers African industrialisation, not dependence.
To the youth and academia: Invest in STEM, document the evidence, and hold leaders accountable. The industrial future of Africa will be built by those who refuse to accept the raw export status quo.

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ABOUT SACMEP AND ISPS

This brief was produced by the Southern African Centre for Mediation and Extremism Prevention (SACMEP) and the Institute for Strategic and Peace Studies (ISPS).

Institute for Strategic and Policy Studies (ISPS)

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SACMEP is a regional transdisciplinary research and knowledge hub focused on mediation and preventing violent extremism across the SADC region. The organisation envisions a peaceful, secure, and resilient Southern Africa where violent extremism is proactively prevented, and mediation efforts are effective, inclusive, and data-driven.

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