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CRITICAL MINERALS &
ENERGY TRANSITION

ACCET Perspectives | No. 1 | 2026



THE LOBITO CORRIDOR AND THE POLITICS OF CONTROL IN AFRICA'S MINERAL ECONOMY.

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Suggested Citation

Wellington Muzengeza, *The Lobito Corridor and the Politics of Control in Africa's Mineral Economy* (ACCET Perspectives, Africa Centre for Critical Minerals and Energy Transition 2026).

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The Lobito Corridor is not just an infrastructure project; it is a test of who controls Africa's critical minerals in the energy transition era. Linking the DRC's copper and cobalt belt to Angola's Atlantic port, it promises shorter export routes and reduced costs, but infrastructure of this scale is never neutral. It reshapes trade flows, redistributes power, and often reinforces existing asymmetries rather than resolving them. As global demand for copper and cobalt intensifies, the corridor sits at the centre of competition over transition minerals. "The corridor does not automatically transform the structure of extraction," notes Dr Ange Dorine Irakoze. "It can improve efficiency, but without deliberate policy choices, it risks reinforcing existing patterns of raw mineral exports."

The corridor is also a geopolitical project. External actors, Western governments, multinationals, and emerging powers are financing infrastructure while shaping the systems through which minerals move. These arrangements embed asymmetries in capital, technical capacity, and negotiation power.

Virtus Minerals and the DRC

Recent developments in the Democratic Republic of the Congo's mining sector vividly illustrate the complex dynamics of external influence, governance, and contested sovereignty. In March 2026, Virtus Minerals acquired Chema's cobalt and copper assets for approximately USD 30 million under the framework of the U.S.–DRC Strategic Minerals Partnership. Initially celebrated as a milestone investment, the deal quickly became controversial. Investigations revealed that Virtus had overstated its operational footprint, citing a processing plant that had been inactive for more than a decade and had never been fully acquired. This revelation cast doubt not only on the company's credibility but also on the robustness of oversight mechanisms within such strategic partnerships.

The leadership of Virtus, composed largely of individuals with U.S. military backgrounds, aligned neatly with Washington's preference for "security-linked" operators in sensitive sectors, yet this alignment raised questions about the militarisation of resource governance and the extent to which strategic minerals are being securitised rather than industrialised. U.S. government support, including USAID-linked funding, was subsequently suspended pending verification of the company's claims, underscoring the fragility of trust and the importance of transparency in mineral sector engagements.

This reflects a broader pattern: external engagement in Africa's mineral sectors is increasingly tied not only to investment flows but to strategic positioning within global supply chains. Infrastructure projects, corporate acquisitions, and bilateral partnerships are all embedded in an architecture of influence where transparency and accountability are often secondary to geopolitical imperatives. The Lobito Corridor must be understood within this wider framework. It is not merely a logistical artery but a geopolitical instrument through which external actors seek to shape the terms of mineral extraction, circulation, and valuation.

For policymakers in Angola, the DRC, and the wider region, the corridor offers undeniable logistical advantages, shorter routes, reduced costs, and diversification away from congested southern corridors, yet efficiency alone does not guarantee development. Without deliberate industrial policy, local processing capacity, and rigorous regulatory enforcement, improved infrastructure risks accelerating the export of raw materials rather than transforming them into engines of domestic growth. The challenge is not simply to move minerals faster, but to embed infrastructure within strategies that prioritise sovereignty, value addition, and long-term economic transformation. Otherwise, the Lobito Corridor may serve external demand more effectively than it serves African development.

Governance Risks and Institutional Fragility

Large-scale infrastructure projects rely on complex financing, long-term concessions, and often opaque contracts. In contexts of weak oversight, these arrangements can concentrate benefits among political and economic elites while limiting broader societal gains. “There are already questions being raised about transparency,” Djaffar notes. “People are asking who is negotiating, on what terms, and in whose interest.” Observers note that infrastructure can amplify existing governance weaknesses, entrenching asymmetries rather than resolving them. The Lobito Corridor risks becoming another example of infrastructure that facilitates extraction while bypassing broader developmental imperatives. In such contexts, infrastructure can consolidate existing power structures rather than broaden economic participation.

The risks extend to communities along the corridor. Investigations by Global Witness suggest more than 1,200 structures in Kolwezi could be affected, placing thousands at risk of displacement. “What communities anticipate more immediately are risks, displacement, uncertainty, and limited consultation,” says Djaffar. While employment and connectivity gains are possible, unresolved issues around compensation and governance could fuel long-term tensions.

Infrastructure as Power

At its core, the Lobito Corridor crystallises a fundamental question of control. Infrastructure is never merely steel and concrete; it is a technology of power. Those who finance, design, and operate such corridors do not simply lay tracks or build ports; they shape how trade works, how resources are valued, who controls them and the hierarchies of sovereignty. In the DRC, where mineral wealth has long been the axis of political contestation and economic fragility, this question becomes especially acute.

The long-term impact of the corridor will hinge on governance and negotiation. Without robust institutions, transparent contracts, and strategic industrial policy, diversification of routes risks becoming little more than diversification of dependency. External demand, from Washington, Brussels, Beijing, or other centres of power, may continue to dictate outcomes more than domestic priorities. “In the short term, mining companies, logistics

operators, and investors are likely to be the primary beneficiaries,” observes Dr Ange Dorine Irakoze. “The key question is whether these gains translate into broader spillover effects for local economies over time.”

In practice, new routes do not automatically translate into new forms of economic power. The Lobito Corridor exemplifies a broader continental dilemma: infrastructure as both opportunity and instrument of external influence. Whether in mineral supply chains, digital platforms, or energy grids, African states confront the same challenge: how to assert agency within systems increasingly structured by external capital and technological dominance. The corridor thus becomes more than a logistical artery; it is a test of sovereignty, governance, and Africa’s capacity to transform infrastructure into genuine instruments of emancipation rather than conduits of dependency.

Agency or Dependency?

The Lobito Corridor embodies both promise and peril. On one hand, it offers efficiency gains, shorter routes, reduced costs, and diversified exports, which could reshape regional trade. On the other hand, it risks reproducing the very extractive dependencies and external influences that have long defined Africa’s mineral economies. Infrastructure of this scale is never neutral; it is a political instrument that redistributes power, redefines sovereignty, and determines who captures value. For Angola, the DRC, and the wider region, the corridor is not simply steel rails or a deep-water port; it is a crucible of agency. Will it catalyse domestic industrialisation, strengthen sovereignty, and embed value locally? Or will it become yet another conduit through which Africa’s minerals flow outward, reinforcing the asymmetries it was meant to overcome? “For many observers, the question is not whether the corridor will function, but who it will ultimately serve,” says Djaffar.

“The corridor has substantial development potential, but it should be viewed as an enabler rather than a guarantee,” adds Dr Ange Dorine Irakoze. “Its long-term impact will depend on how effectively it is integrated with broader economic and industrial policies.”

Ultimately, the Lobito Corridor is a test of governance and imagination. Without structural shifts in policy and institutional capacity, it may accelerate extraction while deepening external control. With deliberate intervention, however, it could mark a turning point, transforming Africa’s mineral wealth from a source of dependency into a foundation for sovereignty, innovation, and global influence. The stakes are not merely regional; they speak to Africa’s broader trajectory in the 21st-century mineral economy.

About Author

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