



IRMA

Initiative for Responsible
Mining Assurance

Bridging the Gap: How IRMA Helped Rebuild Trust Between Mine and Community

In the Beginning, Voices Were Lost in Translation

Before the audit, community members rarely had a seat at the table. Now, they bring the chairs.

That's how it feels in Shurugwi, Zimbabwe, where a shift in how mining is done - and who gets to speak about it - has started to take hold.

The Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA), a global standard for more responsible mining, played a big role in that shift. IRMA is not just about emissions or tick-box safety, but the full picture: labor, land, community, biodiversity, water, human rights. It brings companies, workers, communities and civil society to the same table, and it doesn't just ask for compliance — it pushes for better.

The audits are independent, the findings are public, and the focus is on shared progress. Change doesn't come from slogans or public relations campaigns. It comes from patient work: dialogue, discomfort, and the simple act of being heard.

Brian Chiteme, a member of the local community, remembers the old days well. Meetings with Unki Mine felt few and far between. When they did happen, he says, they didn't really feel like they were for the community — rather, it felt like meetings were just about them.

“Only the councilor went to meetings with the mine,” Brian recalls. “Not the other members of the community. Some of these big guys came and dominated the meeting... the community was being sidelined.”

From Unki's perspective, the relationship wasn't broken — but it wasn't exactly working either. “We've had cordial relations with our communities over the years,” said Antony Chadliwa, IRMA Lead at Unki. “But there were negative perceptions, some due to misunderstanding how we operate. With IRMA, community confidence grew. They saw we weren't just ticking boxes — we were engaging for real.”

Indeed, things started to change when the Unki Mine underwent the audit — a deep, independent evaluation that involved interviews with over a hundred local stakeholders, from government officials and nurses to farmers, elders and young people from nearby villages.

It wasn't perfect, and it didn't fix everything overnight. But it opened a door. And this time, it stayed open.



Did You Know?

The IRMA audit includes over **400 criteria** — from worker safety and wage fairness to biodiversity, water quality, and community engagement.

A Mine Among Communities

Unki Mine, owned by Anglo American Platinum, sits on Zimbabwe's Great Dyke, a stretch of land rich with platinum group metals and mining history. The mine employs over 2,000 people and operates in a region where mining can be both a lifeline and a source of deep tension.

The surrounding communities, like Village 17, Pasimupindu, and Rietfontein, live in close proximity to the mining lease area. The mine's entrance might be kilometers from town, but its tunnels reach deep underground, close to where people live, farm, collect water, and raise children. Shared roads, shared rivers, shared risks.

While relations between the mine and communities were generally cordial, a sense of distance and mistrust lingered. Resettlement from past expansions had created concerns that weren't always clearly addressed. The audit helped open new channels of communication — and trust began to grow.

In places like this, where roads and rivers are shared between company and community, often unequally, the line between "mine site" and "community" blurs quickly. If a truck kicks up dust, it's someone's breathing problem. If blasting shifts the land, it's someone's cracked wall. If a stream is dammed or redirected, it's someone's food and water supply.

For years, these issues festered beneath the surface.

"There wasn't much transparency," said Fadzai Midzi of the Zimbabwe Environmental Law Organisation (ZELO), a civil society organization that supports mining-affected communities. "People assumed corruption... they weren't aware of what the mining companies were doing."

Enter: The Audit

With Unki Mine, Anglo American was one of the first large mining groups to submit a site for IRMA's full audit. It wasn't just about proving something to outsiders or to win awards.

"There was no hesitation. We were quite keen to take part," Antony said. "We wanted to strengthen our systems, our relationships with communities, and improve how we manage the environment. We saw it as a way to improve how we do things across the board — for our workers, our neighbors, and the land itself. It was an opportunity to align with international standards."

It was, in part, a "stress test" to their own systems: what's working, what's not, and how far is the mine really living up to the expectations of those living beside it?

IRMA's audit model goes beyond paperwork. It asks tough questions. It visits the places where complaints originate. It treats communities not as externalities, but as experts in their own lives.

But not everyone understood what IRMA was at first. "The company knew what was coming," Fadzai says. "But for communities, it felt like just another meeting. People didn't know that their voices were going to be heard in a different way."

ZELO stepped in to help. They ran awareness sessions, explaining what an IRMA audit meant: that people could speak freely, that their feedback would be recorded, and that companies would be expected to respond. Their stories, not just policies and plans, would count.

That shift, Fadzai says, was pivotal.

Dialogue Over Complaints

One of the first tangible changes came in the way Unki engaged with communities. Before the IRMA audit, Unki already had a Community Engagement Forum in place — but participation was limited and dialogue often felt one-sided. The audit process helped make that space more transparent and inclusive, strengthening community involvement and shifting it from passive attendance to active engagement. The forum now meets quarterly with Unki Mine representatives. Not when there's a crisis, not when someone complains — just regularly, as a matter of course.

"We now follow up each community meeting with village-level sessions," Antony shared. "That way, feedback reaches everyone, and misunderstandings don't linger. We're also more deliberate now in how we prepare for those forums," he added. "We use the IRMA standard as a guide — not just our internal Anglo social processes — so the way we engage is clearer, more transparent, and better understood by everyone involved."

The audit gave people a platform, and a path forward. ZELO also helped ensure that communities could help shape the agenda, not just receive it. That shift from reactive to proactive was key.

Unki began sharing more information about environmental management. They created a community environmental committee and started simplifying technical data, like water sample results, so people could understand them.

That, says Fadzai, is how trust is built: not through grand gestures, but through consistent action.

What Got Raised and What Got Fixed

During the audit, community members raised long-standing issues:

- Legacy resettlement: many issues had been addressed before the audit, but some of them resurfaced and were clarified through renewed dialogue.
- Infrastructure concerns: communities needed better roads, access to clean water, and a reliable bridge that wouldn't flood every rainy season.
- Employment practices: people wanted to understand how contractor workers were being treated (working conditions, benefits or grievance processes).

Unki listened.

In response, they made some visible changes. They simplified water sample reporting and began sharing results with the new community environmental committee. They tracked how contractors treated their workers. They started hosting dedicated feedback sessions — not just reporting back but asking questions too.

Grievances didn't vanish, but something else happened. People stopped going straight to formal written complaints. "Now they verify issues first," says one Unki representative. "There's less conflict, there's more direct communication. And there's mutual respect."



Did You Know?

IRMA audits require **direct input from affected communities**, not just company documentation.

How It Feels When People Are Heard

For people like Brian, the difference is emotional as much as operational.

“We now have a sense of ownership,” he says. “We used to be told what was happening. Now, we’re part of it. If something goes wrong, we know where to go. The social performance manager has become someone we can call. Any of us can do it, at any given time.”

“We now have hope and confidence,” he said. “Because we can engage freely, respectfully, and accountably with Unki.”

The community has seen real investment: boreholes drilled, school blocks built, local employment opportunities expanded.

Some challenges remain. As Unki grows, more people move closer to the mine looking for work or opportunity — putting pressure on schools, clinics, roads. Not every grievance has a quick fix.

But unlike before, these problems are now on the table, and the people most affected have a say in how they’re addressed. The tone has changed too.

“The community now wants to protect Unki,” he said. “Because if we protect the mine, we’re protecting ourselves.”

What We Talk About When We Talk About Audits

It might sound strange, but an audit can be a starting point. A hinge between the old way and the possible. When done right, it’s not about passing or failing. It’s about listening and taking action.

The IRMA audit gave Unki Mine a mirror - not just to reflect compliance, but to reflect relationships. To make visible what had been unspoken: disconnection, tension, potential.

It gave the community something, too. A chance to be treated not as a public relations risk or a statistic, but as part of the story. It gave the community tools, language, and legitimacy. They weren’t just being consulted. They were being counted.

And maybe that’s the point: responsible mining doesn’t just mean reducing harm, it means increasing dignity.

Beyond the Mine

When a company commits to IRMA's standards, and follows through, it shows that mining doesn't have to be extractive in spirit. It can be collaborative, imperfect, and evolving.

"It isn't easy," said Hannah Schultz from Anglo American Platinum. "You have to show up consistently — for your stakeholders and with your actions. That's what Unki has done."

The real power of IRMA isn't in a checklist or a seal of approval. It's in what it catalyzes: conversations, committees, course corrections.

And if more mines took this path, who knows? Maybe more communities would feel like Brian does now: not just heard, but as a part of it — building the future, one quarterly meeting at a time.

Post-Audit Ownership Change

The Unki Mines (Private) Limited facility is located in Shurugwi, Zimbabwe. The mine produces Iridium, Palladium, Platinum, and Ruthenium. The Unki mine was among the first in the world to complete an audit to the IRMA Standard. The initial audit took place in December 2019 with the first audit report released in February 2021.

At the time of the audit the Unki Mine was owned by Anglo American and operated by Anglo American Platinum. On 28 May, 2025 Anglo American Platinum was demerged from Anglo American to form Valterra Platinum. As the audit was undertaken at the time of the Unki Mine being under the ownership and operation of Anglo American Platinum, this article has referred to the identity of the facility as it was at the time of the audit.

A Quick Guide to IRMA

The Initiative for Responsible Mining Assurance (IRMA) is a global standard, but not the kind you file away or check off in silence. What sets IRMA apart is that it looks at the whole mining picture: it goes beyond emissions or safety stats to ask what it means to be a good neighbor, a fair employer, and a responsible steward of land and water.

IRMA evaluates mines across a wide range of areas — from labor conditions and human rights to biodiversity, indigenous rights, community engagement, land use, and fair wages. It does so independently, and publicly, with the input of all the people mining affects: companies, workers, communities, and civil society groups.

But IRMA isn't just an audit. It's a tool for change. Its purpose is to shine a light, ask hard questions, and support sites in improving, on a consistent basis. The process is built on transparency and respect, with a strong emphasis on meaningful engagement with local communities and Indigenous peoples.

In short: IRMA isn't just about showing what a mine is. It's about helping shape what it could be — if everyone had a voice.