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From Bomato Boomtown: Extraction, Place, and Politics in Solwezi, Zambia

Principal Investigators: Rohit Negi

In 2003, the northwestern province of Zambia witnessed the opening of the Kanshanshi and Lumwana copper mines. These mines employ more than 7,000 workers, most of who live in the nearby town of Solwezi – a previously small boma, or administrative town.

Rohit Negi's dissertation explores Solwezi's transformation as a mining town, providing a valuable case study of social and political change brought about by economic development.

With a current population between 120,000 and 150,000, Solwezi is estimated to have more than tripled in size since 2000. The copper mining industry has caused not only rapid population influx but also haphazard expansion, making Solwezi a modern-day African "Wild West."

Negi completed eight months of fieldwork in Zambia's new frontier during 2007-08. He spent most of his time in Solwezi, but included a month of archival research at the National Archive in the capital of Lusaka. His work expanded on interviews he conducted last year with state officials, NGO representatives, and everyday Zambians from copper mining towns.

This year, Negi looked specifically into Solwezi's changing infrastructure, housing, and economic activities, as well as explored the conceptual tools ordinary people draw upon to understand the town's changes. His investigation focuses on three questions:

- What are the social and geographical effects of copper mining on Solwezi?
- How do people make sense of these changes?
- What can this case tell us about the claims by mining



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industries that they contribute to the development of the region?

One social effect Negi investigates is the redistribution of power in mining towns. The earlier domination of government activities in Solwezi is now being challenged and even replaced by copper mining. However, Negi finds little social or community reinvestment of profits by mining companies. The result is unplanned expansion and overstretched infrastructure.

In 2006, the Kansanshi mine generated \$276 million in profits for its Canadian owners, yet only 0.26 percent of these profits were invested back into community initiatives for Solwezi. This suggests weak social links between the mines and the community.

To learn perceptions of the changes in Solwezi, Negi spoke with residents, workers, and officials in the town. The general view of the "new Solwezi" presented the town as an incomplete space, a "place-in-becoming" or "waking up from a deep sleep." At the same time, residents lamented the erosion of "old Solwezi," where people knew each other in a face-to-face community.

Negi will follow these and other lines of inquiry as he analyzes data collected during his fieldwork. He will present his results at a conference at Oxford University in September 2008.

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