

Rustenburg's mines dodging responsibility

While many mines are attempting to implement new legislation, there are problems with companies taking responsibility for their environmental and social impacts. **Kally Forrest** visited the mining community of Rustenburg and learnt about some of the issues.

Rustenburg, a charming little town set in the Magaliesberg with orange orchards and colourful bougainvillea. No longer. It's a town dedicated to rapacious mining. Said to be the fastest growing town in South Africa, the mining giants Anglo Platinum, Implats, Lonplats and Xstrata are furiously extracting platinum and chrome to meet world demand. With platinum selling for \$2 010 an ounce it can't happen quickly enough.

Yet with all this wealth from mining activity local black communities believe they have seen little improvement in the quality of their lives. And in recent times, as metal prices have climbed, it has got worse.

Squatter camps sprawl across grazing land next to platinum mines. Despite mining companies asserting that they are reducing migrant labour there is little evidence of this. Workers from Mozambique, Lesotho, Malawi, Swaziland and South Africans from the Eastern Cape receive a living out allowance (LOA) of between R600 - R1 000 pm. Most prefer to pocket this to increase their small wages than to live in mine hostels. Instead they construct shacks as

close to the mines as possible.

These informal settlements are catchments for the spread of illness, disease and HIV/AIDS. There are few roads and most informal settlements have no electricity, sewerage or running water – donkey carts move round selling water.

Social problems abound. Without the provision of family housing to stabilise communities, numerous sex workers ply their trade in the camps. HIV/AIDS is rampant and alcohol abuse common. There is conflict between migrant workers and local people around love affairs and scarce resources.

Added to this ill health environment is mine pollution. Mining waste is visible in many parts of Rustenburg often in the form of slimes dams and tailings waste facilities. Rock and sand waste contain metals which when exposed to water and air cause acid leachate. This can poison both surface and underground water.

Mining blasts and drilling can also pierce underground water dykes allowing dangerous chemicals to seep into water that people use to wash in and drink when it surfaces. Neither the mines nor government monitor the impact of mining on common water provision outside

the mines.

The air people breathe also holds dangers. In recent years there has been a noticeable increase in respiratory illnesses in the area. Wind blows fine dust from piles of waste and from tailings and slimes dams which are not planted with reeds. At night, when mines are not monitored by environmental agencies, flaring from platinum smelters spews smoke and waste into the atmosphere. Ventilation shafts also continuously pump up and release underground gases into the air.

Farmers see their orange trees sicken and die. People living with HIV/AIDS find their immune systems and their resistance to illness further lowered. Persistent pollution leads to cancer risks, rashes, irritations and a variety of respiratory illnesses. There is the fear too that tailings dams could again burst as happened in 1974 when a dam burst killing people, destroying buildings and spreading poison waste. It is interesting to note that Implats' insurers will not cover the mine's tailings dams.

Take a look on pages 13 – 16 and see some of the damage that mining has dumped onto surrounding communities.



Some community activists who aim to launch an ethical forum called the Rustenburg Environmental Coalition (Eric Makuoa on right)

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

Mine companies in Rustenburg have provided social resources for their employees and funding for projects in local communities. They have been involved in community education and training programmes, in housing, business development, HIV/AIDS programmes, school feeding schemes and assisting local agriculture. ARV programmes are not however extended to family members or the community.

Mines however outsource many of their functions. It is these sub-contracted workers who often live in the worst conditions and for whom mine owners and sub-contractors take little responsibility. It is estimated that of South Africa's 450 000 miners, 97 000 work for contractors. A Rustenburg community medical practitioner commented, "The mines are dodging their responsibility with the outsourcing of labour... if it is one of their labourers he gets seen to in their health facilities. But if he is a contractor's labourer, he does not get treated, he is given a letter to sort out his own hypertension, his own imaturia, or his own TB..."

The medical practitioner also asserts that sub-contracted miners are very poorly housed. He notes that there is a "lack of consistent housing policy for mineworkers on the part of mining companies. A policy that would allow for: who is working here; the provision of proper services; and proper provision of

sport and cultural amenities."

Mining companies have adopted the Mining Charter and Balanced Scorecard and are showing a commitment to operating within new legislation. They employ environmental experts, produce environmental reports and hold compulsory environmental impact assessment meetings with communities. So why are many of Rustenburg's mining communities in such a mess?

Most company engagement with the environmental and social impact of mining are half-hearted and top down. Organisations who wish to access mines' Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), required by law, find it almost impossible. An Angloplats employee who has been asked repeatedly by Bench Marks, an organisation doing research, for its EIA admitted that "It's a work in progress".

It is equally impossible to get EIA reports from the Department of Mineral & Energy (DME). A lawyer who accessed a mining company's EIA was given one minute to look at it, and was not allowed to make a copy. The DME behaved as if it was classified information whereas it is supposedly a public document.

Consultation with communities is also problematic. Mining companies bombard communities with information from geological, geographic, and hydrological experts to counter complaints and

leave communities baffled, ignorant and disempowered around what they are experiencing. Community people often have low literacy levels and few experts to call upon to assist them in their claims.

This imbalance of power allows companies to ignore community grievances. Often communities claim that companies have not consulted them while mines insist that they have. Mines deliberately avoid meaningful communication because in the end, they feel more accountable to shareholder requests.

A further problem with consultation is that mining corporations have no forum where all stakeholders are represented. Mines deal with stakeholders in a piecemeal way and so coordination of views and activities is difficult.

There is also a deep problem with accepting responsibility. Often when a company is confronted with, say, a complaint about smelter emissions, it will blame another mine and argue that it is impossible to prove that the pollution comes from its operations. Indeed it is difficult to apportion blame for air pollution, dust, water contamination or the drying up of ground water. In tests, Angloplats found that in Bergsig, a Rustenburg suburb, air pollution was unacceptably high but it shifted responsibility claiming that it could not alone be held accountable.

Although mine companies have installed technology to monitor water and air pollution levels, it is not easy to measure all kinds of pollution, such as in underground water courses. Problems only become apparent after long periods of contamination. There needs to be a commitment and cooperation around these issues. But it is uncommon for the four mine companies to consult and work

together around environmental and social problems.

Mines externalise their costs by not providing proper housing for all their miners, or running waste into rivers, or polluting the air. The community or municipality must bear the costs.

Companies will also not take responsibility for the social impacts of mining. Problems such as widespread alcoholism, HIV and STDS in neighbouring squatter camps, the prevalence of sex workers, or the increase of respiratory illnesses are not their business.

Mines often disregard community complaints. When Luka residents complain of cracks in their house walls due to blasting, mining inspectors tell them it is poor workmanship or that they used the wrong cement. When a mine loses a case brought by a community this information gets quickly buried. Or when Bench Marks presented the results of its research both government and mining houses ignored its report. Through persistence however Bench Marks has gradually persuaded CEOs of mining companies to discuss its research together with community members.

WHAT CAN BE CHANGED?

Over the years Rustenburg communities have complained about the effects of mining activity but in an un-coordinated way. Now ten different groups are working towards launching an ethical forum, the Rustenburg Environmental Coalition. Bench Marks is assisting them to strengthen organisation and to conduct grassroots research.

Sadly the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) seldom attends these community ethical forums, despite invitations. Individual NUM members are involved but the

union has not addressed company environmental and social abuses in its structures. Bench Marks and the community forum have stressed that they are unaligned politically but union organisers remain distant.

The community and Bench Marks emphasise that they are not against mining as such. They see its value as an employment creator and in the development offshoot of stimulating local business. Their demand is for companies to conduct business in a responsible and human way.

SOME ALTERNATIVES

Bench Marks in the course of its research has suggested ways of operating that could change the course of mining in Rustenburg. The community is currently engaging with these ideas, some of which are briefly explored below.

Mines need to openly consult with the community ethical forum on their EIAs and Social Labour Plans. Different mining companies also need to work together on issues. They could, for example, consider using one smelter, taking turns to use it so that individual company emissions could be monitored.

In the area of corporate social investment mines need to listen to communities' priorities instead of implementing 'pet projects' which they think are good for locals. A mine, for example, may decide a community clinic is a good idea but then fail to consider the importance of well trained staff to run it.

Mines need to scrap the LOA and incorporate it into the wage. The LOA encourages miners to leave mine compounds in order to access the LOA to augment their wages. Companies need to build decent single and family units for miners who want them. This will downscale the flight of miners into squatter camps. In the meantime mines need

to work with the municipality to upgrade dangerous and unhealthy squatter camps which house their workers. This will assist to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS in an area where infection levels have reached nearly 60%.

Mines could also provide funding for organisations to run courses on HIV/AIDS and treatment programmes in informal settlements. Together with civil society companies could focus on creating work and business opportunities for local women so that they can try and escape the sex trade.

Companies could also embark on community projects to improve the environment. For example, reed and grass planting could protect the environment and provide people with harvesting opportunities.

Government also needs to independently monitor air and water quality. In this regard the DME in the North West Province, known for its high levels of corruption, must begin to operate in an open manner.

There is an urgent need for mining companies to extend beyond labour rights into environmental rights where they have disrupted communities. Many of these challenges for mines and their communities could be turned into business opportunities. In this way when companies have removed minerals from the earth, they will leave behind a viable, thriving Rustenburg, and not a ghost town like Welkom whose gold is running out. LB

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