

Socio-environmental conflict: an opportunity for mining companies

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Anthony Hodge's paper is an interesting reflection on two themes: how to understand the apparent "paradox" in which the improved social and environmental performance of mining companies has been accompanied by increased frequency of conflict at mine sites; and how to move beyond this paradox by conceptualizing, and then creating, conditions that could lead to diminished conflict and greater alignment among mining and other interests (of communities, of urban populations, civil society organizations and government). The core of his argument is that the paradox can be explained by two factors: the progressive empowerment of communities and the absence of dialogue that might allow for the creation of

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overlapping consensus. The path forward must therefore be grounded in greater dialogue and attitudes that allow for enhanced sensitivity across cultural and other differences.

While it is hard to disagree with this analysis, I think one can expand on it.

Performance enhancement can be driven by market pressure, regulatory pressure, socio-political pressure and ethical commitment pure and simple. Thought of this way, company socio-environmental performance and social conflict are mutually constitutive: conflict can drive improved performance, and while improved performance *might* dissipate conflict it may also lead communities and other concerned populations to continue demanding better and better performance in much the same way that consumers keep demanding better and better products. Seen this way, the paradox begins to dissolve. Instead what we have are mining companies that must continuously enhance their performance in the face of different markets that continue to demand improvement: consumer markets, financial markets and the “market” of community and societal demands.

However, as Hodge implies, the “market” of community and civil society demands differs from other markets in that it is demanding not just a product or a return on investment but rather a whole way of being and co-existing. These are demands for forms of respect, forms of democracy and changes in the ways in which market processes are embedded in social life. They are not necessarily outright rejections of mining (though sometimes they may be), but these demands do reflect an

insistence that “development” should not be imposed by others who claim to know best because they are “modern,” “educated,” “responsible” or simply a different skin color. Indeed, I tend to think that there is something tremendously healthy going on in conflicts over mining. Many of these conflicts have become a venue in which fundamental questions about democracy, rights and ecology are being fought out (even when some conflicts are simply over money).

In some strange way, mine sites have become locales in which populations can have discussions about the meaning of development and good living that they are less able to have with their own national elites. In this sense, mining companies occupy a slot in which they could be a rather different “bridge to the future” from that which I think Hodge has in mind when he coins this phrase. Mining companies really could help lead other elites on a march towards different and far more progressive ways of combining development, democracy and sustainability. Before we get carried away, cases like Marikana remind us that many companies are very far from playing any such role, and are absolutely the problem rather than part of a solution. But that does not alter the fact that mining companies find themselves at the very core of some of the most significant real world development debates of the moment. It is up to them how far they chose to be led by the conflicts that accompany them, and what sorts of bridge they want to build towards what sorts of future.