



Media statement by the Bench Marks Foundation

Abandoned mines are seriously impacting communities and is contributing to child-labour

19 August 2014

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

South Africa has approximately 6,000 abandoned mines, of which about 160 are in Witbank alone, that are spilling acid water and heavy metals into the environment, says the Bench Marks Foundation in a research report released in Johannesburg today.

The report shows that the mining industry and government's cavalier attitude towards proper closure of mines and the rehabilitation of the environment, despite strict environmental and water legislation, is seriously affecting communities near mines in a number of ways, and has a huge adverse impact on the rest of South Africa.

The report, Policy Gap 9 on South African Coal Mining: Corporate Grievance Mechanisms, Community Engagement Concerns and Mining Impacts, focuses on communities near mines in the Nkangala District including Witbank (eMalahleni) and Middelburg (Steve Tshwete) in South Africa and on two mining corporations, Anglo American Corporation and BHP Billiton.

"In terms of the Minerals and Petroleum Resources Development Act (MPRD), companies are required to set aside funds for effective mine closure," says John Capel, Executive Director for the Bench Marks Foundation.

"But we have seen that many of the mining companies skirt around this by selling mines that are approaching its end-of-life to 'juniors' who do not have the resources or the capacity to close such mines properly.

"This is causing a major cost externalisation to society, as post-closure impacts are extensive. Therefore, we are not only dealing with major environmental, health and social problems while mines are active, but we have to deal with it when they close too!"

According to the report, the conditions around the abandoned Coronation Mine in Mpumalanga, that used to belong to Anglo Coal (Amcoal) is shocking: sinkholes are found throughout the area, and there have been reports of people, especially children having burnt their legs while walking in the area – it is not properly fenced off or guarded – when mine waste collapses while they are walking over it.

In addition, as it is not guarded and there is nothing really warning people of the dangers of the areas, those migrating to eMalahleni to seek jobs, often settle in the extremely dangerous exclusion zone.

"Shaft coal mines are extremely shallow and are prone to caving into sinkholes especially during the rainy season," says Capel.

"Shafts also fill up with water and then decant acid mine water into both the groundwater and the surface water. The coal waste also spontaneously combusts.

"Our community monitors have also found that the coal waste pile on the edge of Likazi information settlement community at Coronation mine is being re-mined by artisanal monitors. These miners dig for coal to sell to people in information settlements who do not have access to electricity.

“We have discovered that children are being used in the re-mining of the mine. They tunnel their way under the coal pile and then pass trays loaded with coal in a relay fashion to the mouth of the tunnel.

“According to a guide who helped our research team, an adult and two boys recently died at this mine when the tunnel they had dug under the mine waste collapsed on them.

“Mines that have not been properly closed serve as an invitation to the large number of unemployed people in our country to engage in uncontrolled and unregulated illegal mining and too many children are being drawn into this.

“We are regularly hearing about miners trapped in illegal mines and often dying as a result of a mine collapsing. This is going to continue to happen unless something is done about mine closures”.

The report states that the Bench Marks Foundation is still trying to determine if Anglo Coal was issued with a mine closure certificate, or whether it sold the operation just before closure to another mining company with less resources or skills to close the mine properly.

“What is clear is that this mining site has not been rehabilitated and is causing serious harm to communities, water, soil and the surrounding area.

“The Department of Mineral Resources and national parliament need to effect changes in the MPRDA to make it illegal to sell off a mining operation near the end of its life so as to avoid the costs of proper closure.

“It also needs to track down the former owners of abandoned mines and prosecute them.

“The Bench Marks Foundation also calls for absolute obligatory transparency by mining corporations regarding mine closure funds and plans.

“Throughout South Africa, thousands of communities are living in areas that should have been closed off due to its extremely hazardous conditions.

“Children are playing on soil that spontaneously combusts. Water is polluted and the environmental effects of mining are destroying large areas of land which, without rehabilitation, will leave a nasty and deadly legacy for generations to come”.

To download the report and to view Bench Marks Foundation’s other research reports, go to www.bench-marks.org.za.

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Bench Marks Foundation is an independent non-governmental organisation mandated by churches to monitor the practices of multi-national corporations to

- ensure they respect human rights;
- protect the environment;
- ensure that profit-making is not done at the expense of other interest groups; and
- ensure that those most negatively impacted upon are heard, protected and accommodated within the business plans of the corporations.

The Foundation was launched in 2001 and the Rt Rev Dr Jo Seoka chairs the organisation.

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