



## Media statement by the Bench Marks Foundation

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### **Bench Marks dismisses DRDGold criticism as fatuous**

Johannesburg, Tuesday 5 September 2017

#### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

The Bench Marks Foundation said today it has earned international respect for its use of credible scientific research, as well as its accurate reflection of community views, in its reports over the past decade.

Bench Marks was responding to criticism of its latest report, Policy Gap 12, “Waiting to inhale: A Household Survey of Four Soweto Communities Impacted by Mining”, by DRDGold, one of the mines included in the study. It described DRD’s response as “fatuous”.

The report, which is a study of the impact of mining on four communities in Johannesburg, includes substantial research, both from its own field workers and from highly respected scientific, university and industry (such as the Chamber of Mines) sources. Community responses were compiled from 400 questionnaires that were distributed.

The four communities are Riverlea, Diepkloof, Doornkop and Meadowlands.

Responding to DRD’s “disappointment” that Bench Marks had failed to engage with it, David van Wyk, lead researcher of Bench Marks Foundation, and the author of the report, noted that Bench Marks works with communities to assist them to engage with mining companies about the problems they experience.

Bench Marks’ response continues: “Riverlea Community Forum has tried desperately to communicate with DRD, but has been unable to do so on a regular basis. Our researchers experienced difficulties engaging with the mining companies and to get members of mine management to respond to correspondence directed through, for example, the Riverlea Community Forum (RCF), an exercise requiring several follow-up telephone calls and e-mails. The fact that a single meeting, whose minutes are included in our report, was held nearly two years ago can hardly be considered regular communication with the chosen representatives of the community.

“DRD says it is party to two forums which ‘meet regularly’ with community representatives. We are reliably advised that the forum has not met for some time. In addition, the focus of the forums is very narrow – they deal with mine dust – and do not address the many concerns of residents.

“When are mining companies going to free themselves from their paternalistic attitudes that they will determine who the community representatives are, rather than allowing communities themselves to choose who they wish to represent them?

“Bench Marks Foundation prefers to engage with corporations with and through communities about the issues that are of concern to communities, thereby assisting communities to develop the confidence to engage with power and stand up for their constitutional and legal rights. This is also to avoid a dependency situation from developing between the community and the NGO.

“DRD’s defence of unfenced and unsignposted mine dumps is wholly inadequate. The mine noted that every mine dump has ‘at some stage’ been fenced off and signposts clearly displayed.

“It is extremely lame to note that there has ‘at some stage’ been fencing and signposts. That distant memory will be of absolutely no comfort to a family whose child is critically ill from having played in toxic water in an unfenced DRD facility.

“Bench Marks has experience of mining companies in other areas whose tailings facilities are well marked and secure. What is preventing DRD from doing the same?”

“In response to DRD’s claim that dust from its mine dumps ‘pose no health risk and negligible public nuisance’, and that ‘there is no credible evidence that the dust is toxic’, we ask why there is such a high prevalence of respiratory illnesses in the communities studied if this is the case?”

“Our research found that more than half (56.1%) of residents identified respiratory ailments (cough, sinus, asthma and TB) as their most persistent ailment. This is compared to only 25.6% of residents of Danville, Mafikeng, likewise identifying respiratory complaints. Danville was chosen as a control study because it is a township with asbestos roofs that in all ways approximates Riverlea, except that there is no mining in close proximity.

“By making such sweeping and bald claims, DRD is disputing the lived experiences of these communities – which is extremely arrogant towards and demeaning of the community.

“DRD sweepingly dismisses our criticism of its 1970s model of dust buckets and ignores the view of a leading expert, Professor Harold Annegarn, quoted in our report, that a 2004 model only ‘marginally’ improves efficiency. We simply cannot fathom DRD’s unscientific defence of an outdated and outmoded system of dust measurement, in the face of our research which suggests a more effective alternative.

“Once again, as we did in our report, we have to conclude that for DRD, profitability comes before responsibility.”

“DRD dismisses our reporting of its environmental damage as ‘factually incorrect and irresponsible’, and admits to a single leak from one of its pipelines in the vicinity of the Russell Stream in February 2016. Given that the company itself reported 16 environmental incidents in 2011 alone, this admission to a single incident in 2016 is quite remarkable.

“DRD also takes issue with whether it has a water use licence. In response, we once again reiterate a statement in our report by the minister of water and sanitation – not Bench Marks Foundation - in 2014 that two DRD operations were operating without water licences and that no applications for authorisation had been received by the Department of Water and Sanitation.

“DRD makes much of its commitment to improve the quality of life of those living in its area of influence. Presumably to this end, it donated 500 gas stoves to the Riverlea community. This community has unemployment levels in excess of 60% and is poverty stricken.

“The community forum turned the gas stoves down because they do not mitigate the dust impact of the mine, and gas is not good for people living with respiratory problems. Being poverty stricken, the community cannot afford the monthly gas refills – it has electricity in any case - and the gas stoves will end up in the nearest pawn shop or scrap metal dealer converted into cash. As a high density township, a gas fire or explosion could lead to a major disaster in the community.

“Despite the objections of the community forum, the company apparently went ahead and delivered the gas stoves. The assumption is that communities are too stupid to know what the impacts of the mine are, and that the mine knows best what is good for the community without having to consult.

“In conclusion, DRD Gold’s response is lacking in any meaningful substance, is defensive in nature and we think the company has a lot to answer for.”

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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 by the Rt Rev Dr Jo Seoka who chairs the organisation and by member churches of the SACC.

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