



Media statement by the Bench Marks Foundation

---

## Coal mines continue to pollute air, water and environment

19 August 2014

### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

According to a research report released by the Bench Marks Foundation today, communities in South Africa's Nkangala District continue to battle with severe air, water and environmental pollution caused by coal mining.

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.

"Communities in the town of Ogies regularly suffer with water shortages and their boreholes often dry up," says John Capel, Executive Director for the Bench Marks Foundation.

"In 2012, community members of Carolina woke up to acid coming out of their taps in their houses, they lodged a claim against the government and won the case, but didn't really as the 'polluter pays principle' went by the wayside as mines argued that it was impossible to prove which of the many mining companies was responsible for the impact.

"People in the district suffer from black lung disease and other respiratory diseases caused by the dust from mining operations.

"Our research shows that the existing public health facilities in the area are unable to cope with the rapid increase in not only the population attracted by the rapid growth of coal mining in the area, but in respiratory illnesses, water borne illnesses caused by water pollution and other illnesses associated with the social impacts caused by the informal settlements that are springing up all over the area.

"I don't think we've improved our conditions related to coal mining since 2006, where it was reported that South Africa's mercury emissions were second only to China, contributing to more than 10% of global emissions, or of the study done in 2012 by WHITIA, where we were ranked as the fifth country with the highest incidence and prevalence of black lung disease in the world".

Says Capel: "We have photographic evidence of the severe air pollution in the area. Each time our researchers went to Witbank, Middleburg, as well as to the townships and informal villages of Coronation, Klarinet, the MNS Informal Settlement and Clewer, they took photos".

The report also shows evidence of the cumulative impact on air quality caused by the existing Kendal power station and the new Kusile power station as well as the amount of dust from trucks, vehicles and machinery servicing the power stations and the mines in the area.

In respect of water and soil, Bench Marks' research clearly shows that coal mining is a major contributor to acid mine drainage in South Africa. The report states that human exposure to acid mine drainage pollutants can occur through ingestion of contaminated water, food or through dermal absorption via water or air.

"Even those of us not living very close to mines will be affected," says Capel. "Research shows that metals such as aluminium, copper, zinc and arsenic can be absorbed by plant tissue when exposed to elevated concentration. These plants are then eaten by animals and humans.

"Our report cites the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Production stating, in 2012, that animals that drink contaminated water and/or feed on contaminated plants have been shown to accumulate metals in their tissue or in their milk.

"The serious harmful effects on health, by mining and in particular coal mining, cannot be highlighted enough. We cannot overemphasise the importance of holding the government accountable in ensuring that laws and regulations governing all aspects of mining are applied".

Capel also said that the Department of Environmental Affairs and the Department of Health must take a holistic view in tackling the causes of ill health in the area around mines and to undertake a proper scientific epidemiological study to determine the full health impact of mining on workers inside the workplace and communities near mines.

He said that the report shows that the widespread occurrence of diseases is not a natural event and that it must be stopped. The 'polluter pays' principle must be applied and polluters must be held to account.

"The ill health caused by air pollution violates the right to clean air as enshrined in our constitution, section 24 of the Bill of Rights. This is only one example of violations experienced by communities.

"Government must take the threat to water and food security, never mind the health issues posed by coal mining in Mpumalanga more seriously.

"It and the mining companies must also effect and conduct community consultation, negotiation and participation across the entire life of a mine as, after all, they are the ones that are most impacted on by this sector".

To download the report and to view Bench Marks Foundation's other research reports, go to [www.bench-marks.org.za](http://www.bench-marks.org.za).

ENDS

---

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.

**Bench Marks Foundation Contact:**

Mr John Capel,  
Executive Director  
011 832 1743 or 082 870 8861  
Email: jcapel@eject.co.za

Mr David van Wyk  
Head Researcher  
083 689 6208  
Email: d.vanwyk58@gmail.com