

MORE VIEWS ON ALTERNATIVE MINING INDABA

By John Capel and Hassen Lorgat- Bench Marks Foundation

The recent flurry of post AMI articles have had their moment of fame until next year, but the discussion is welcomed as it raises at least two valid points – raised by others over the recent past. Maguwu and Terreblanche lament that climate change was not discussed and, importantly, the AMI failed to address and build action on its own past decisions.¹ Ultimately, they admonish the AMI for not campaigning to keep the natural resources in the ground, a position we have not heard Farai articulate vociferously for when he is at home working with poor communities.²

This is understandable as we must not simply counter-pose one slogan for another, and invariably progressive groups are often the last to come to areas where prospection and implicit decision to mine has been given. What we then find is that communities are being divided by the allure of false promises of mining riches, in collusion with our Department of Mineral Resources (DMR). Where people are well organised and resist, we find the full mining – energy complex come down upon them, like the people of Xolobeni are witnessing.

Today, the united people of Xolobeni will once again face the united power of the DMR and the Australian mining company who insist on mining over the heads of people, and they will do this whatever the costs in lives, social cohesion, and democratic rights to refuse mining... We must campaign nationally and internationally to ensure that the peoples right in Xolobeni to say NO TO MINING is successful. It is the second Pondoland Revolt, but it is one that must be fought in Australia, the US, UK, Joburg and everywhere where those whose greed for money and hatred of democracy is self-evident.

These questions are not simply ideological statements but require serious organisational-political work and must be derived with communities, journeyed together about the failure of mining to deliver any benefits to the majority of South Africans. Our 13 years working with mining communities is one that does not have a good story to tell.

Rutledge of Action Aid South Africa, in turn, attacks the “current model” of the AMI, which excludes communities and preferences NGO elites.” He further alleges that these elites (presumably leaders in the AMI) “speak on behalf of communities and raise funds in the name of communities, while limiting and excluding communities in the very same way that state and corporate duty bearers consistently do.”

Notwithstanding the corporate and UN speak, raised in the concern about substitutionism, but the writers of both articles write as if these problems are external to them. They do not take ownership of the perceived problems – only for their own critiques. Yet they have been participants in these processes without consistently arguing and organizing for the politics they want for the whole movement. But they are not the first to do this, as others before

¹ See Farau Maguwu and Christelle Terreblanche, “We need a real “Alternatives to Mining” Indaba” (Pambazuka News, 16-02-2016)

²See press release 2013, celebrating Zimbabwe’s 33rd anniversary. In that statement they wrote: As the nation celebrates 33 years of independence, CNRG calls on government to do the following: Ensure that Zimbabwe’s natural resources are governed in a transparent and professional manner, for the good of all Zimbabweans”

have done the same and to criticize politics and processes after the fact, or “after the indaba”, which has limited value for those who are dedicated to build greater principled unity in action in a very fractious sector – civil society, broadly defined.

Yet both contributions we refer to (and others), contain valuable critiques of the AMI, albeit somewhat limited. They, for instance, fail to fully critique the trends towards elite representation, corporatization, etc. They fail to recognize it in business unionism, NGO-ism, church organizations and its networks and even some communities - all have been subject of corporate capture. It is a phenomenon that engulfs more sectors than simply “the NGOs”. Thus, we argue that corporate capture has come with a vengeance to the faith-based or, more specifically, the church leaders and churches, which we will talk more of later.

Elitism and elitists come in many ways and we need a more substantial discussion about how to combat this control over processes and how those of us, genuinely interested, can in its place contribute towards the task of building a popular movement of the workers and the poor (“the communities”, etc.), which will ensure that they keep all of us in check as well.

SO, if we begin to have a wider discussion about elite power at the AMI and elsewhere, we will have to ask hard questions to all who participate: university-based researchers, academics, lawyers and professors (and doctoral students) as well as church, community, social movement, political party and union “leaders” too. In addition we must not forget the role of the International NGOs who also have an agenda that must be scrutinized as well. If we do this, we will own both the problems (as we allowed it) and become part of the solution. This brings us to the hard and persistent question of community participation which cannot be avoided head on:

How many communities or community members did the big powerful NGO groupings like Action Aid, Oxfam, or university-based groupings or the established church-aligned groups bring to the AMI, to enlarge the voice and participation of communities? If these groups, in particular the INGOs helped to fund or supported the participation of autonomous community groups in the AMI, it would advance our deliberations ten-fold. But alas, this did not happen.

For the record the Bench Marks brought 20 community representatives working in different provinces with us to share experiences, debate and protest at the Indabas. This cost the organisation well over R200 000 for transport, clean and decent accommodation, good quality meals to ensure quality and effective learning exchanges. We could not bring more participants but we sincerely ask that each of these groups answer what have they done to promote the much cherished goal of community participation and ownership of the AMI?

We believe, as do the two sets of commentators, that the AMI is a valuable forum, which must be further democratized and strengthened. The AMI, as we understand it, was set up some 8 years ago, with a modest 40 delegates to challenge the dominant narrative coming from the Investing in Mining Indaba that has been around for decades going unchallenged. Increasingly over the years, the thousands of negative impacts of mining on society, economic wellbeing and the ecology as well as the fiscus and taxation was laid bare for all to see.

We argue daily that in mining and extractives at large there are winners and losers and that not all investment is good and increasingly communities we work with point out that the true costs of mining calls for other development paths outside extractivism be explored. The Indaba over a year ago, threatened to sue the Alternative Mining Indaba for using the African word Indaba, and when they were challenged back, they backed off. The AMI is intended as a sharing space for communities, NGOs and faith-based organisations and must resist capture by corporations and INGOs, who by the way also raise their money in the name of communities.

Let us not be misunderstood, INGOs do at times play a progressive role, but sometimes wittingly or not, displace nationally based social movements and NGOs to the detriment of building power from below, which is essential to build a society free of exploitation and marginalisation. We further hope that they do not take the AMI *as the only avenue* to express their work.

We now turn to our concern that the critiques have not fully explored and this is how we contest corporate power.

Firstly, the AMI is not the only forum to express our work, and should not be for others as well. It is but one of a number of engagements, that we use to advance a progressive agenda.

Secondly, and in this regard, we must keep it as a platform to exchange views and plan collective actions with working people and the poor we work with to contest corporate power. Thus it must be a forum for workers, the mining communities, progressive faith-based organizations and NGOs but we must resist corporate encroachment in our forums. In addition, we must limit the dominance of I-NGOs who with their immense resources, intellectual and financial tend to shape agendas away from the concerns of locals.

Corporate social responsibility and sustainable development agenda is part of the capture of civil society organisations by a business agenda. From the 1970s civil society at the UN level was pushing for a binding code of conduct to reign in the power of transnational corporations. They failed and after pushing strongly for this in the 80s, the 1992 Earth Summit backed by the then General Secretary of the UN, Kofi Annan, voluntarism mechanisms by business were born. The UN launched the voluntary Global Compact, a set of 10 principles. All companies had to do was sign on and hence the defeat of the global south for binding regulations. Business developed Business Action for Sustainable Development; World Business Council for Sustainable Development and the UN encouraged partnerships. Bodies like UNICEF, WHO, and UNDP involved themselves in thousands of partnerships raking tens of million dollars whist losing legitimacy.

The Global South was campaigning for external control over corporations and promoted human rights, skills and technology transfer, local economic development, human rights, equitable sharing of wealth, strict tax measures and accountability of corporations.

Supporting the global compact and its voluntary agenda at the time was WWF, Human Rights Watch, Oxfam, Save the Children and Amnesty International. Many now do not. Here was corporate capture at its best.

Thirdly, we define our approach as evidence or research-based activism, accompanied by community organising and monitoring of corporate conduct with the view of challenging corporate power and continuing to agitate wherever power lies. An advocacy strategy built on research, community organising, building alliances with organised workers and other communities has stood us thus far in good stead. We have much to do and improve and will use whatever forum to advance the objectives of the organisation and the people we work with.

This brings us to the ICMM (International Council on Minerals and Metals) representative speaking at the AMI closing session. If the writers of the two articles can recall, it was a Bench Marks staffer who led the criticism of the ICMM agenda and approach to seeking to talk to communities. He said, and we reiterate, that their current willingness to talk to communities is not genuine and will dissipate as soon as the current phase of capitalist crisis is over. The organised pressure of communities and the deepening crisis, have sharpened the crisis of legitimacy of the mining sector. Mining faces a crisis of legitimacy and business will make overtures to the AMI, hoping to placate its voice and alternative vision captured in the outcomes of each AMI.

We must continually challenge corporate power. Last year, the Bench Marks intervened as CEO Mark Cutifani of Anglo American, fresh from a Vatican visit, begun what we believe to be an exercise aimed at co-opting church leaders. Out of interest the message the Vatican gave many mining executives was to consider the common good and what is meaningful existence. The context was set as the Church of England had decided to disinvest in coal, a landmark visionary investment decision but which was soon overturned.

With all his charm, Cutifani decided to give UK church leaders a visit to very selective mining sights in three countries. On hearing this, the Bench Marks first wrote a letter to Cutifani stating clearly that talking to church investors and not impacted communities was an attempt to gain legitimacy at the expense of communities. We wrote to the UK church leaders inviting them to go on toxic tours of mining areas to witness the devastation of extractionism when they came to South Africa. They refused the toxic tour but agreed to see us for a limited time of only two hours!

Having suffered the first shock, we were in for an even bigger surprise when we heard about a similar initiative with South African church leaders led by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba. Euphemistically called *courageous day of conversation* and hosted by the Anglican Archbishop with about 20 CEOs of who's who in mining. We received an invitation to come and listen and participate from the floor. In addition, the Bench Marks Foundation tried inviting the South African Church leaders on a toxic tour which we believe will make them rethink their keenness to invest in fossil fuels.

We were refused permission to take the church leaders on what we call "a toxic tour" of actually existing life of mining and its impacts on communities. However, and at the last moment, we were allowed to be on one of the panels to address the church leaders. Internally, we debated whether we should take up the seat on the panel at the late hour. Eventually we participated and made our unhappiness known. We restated clearly that mining corporations needed to talk directly to communities, providing them with full information on matters affecting them. This means providing them with mining licenses,

water licenses, social and labour plans, environmental management plans and the resources for them to build their informed capacities. These we have championed for 13 years.

Thus the issue of challenging power means that we must go into their indaba but restrict them from coming into ours. Our questions are strategic, to put corporations under heat to separate off their words from their deeds and to show them up. In addition to get them to make public commitments in front of large audiences to hold them accountable. This is what some of us did during the 2016 Mining Indaba.

At this year's Investing in Africa Mining Indaba, one panel discussion where the Anglican Archbishop Thabo Makgoba was chaperoned by Anglo CEO Mark Cutifani and one community representative, one of us asked the archbishop if he had forsaken the option for the poor for an option for CEOs. In addition, Cutifani was challenged to immediately publish all the ANGLO American Social and Labour Plans on their website and he promised to do so.

These engagements will be futile if not backed up by quality research, community organisations and monitors and a militant media and advocacy campaign.

We have a lot to do to build focus and keep the faith communities on our side, keep out corporations from our organisations and forums, and to increase the organisation and support for self-organisation of communities of workers and the poor. We are up to this challenge and hope the others can remain on course. We have no option but to redouble our efforts as mining is killing the poor and giving the golden goose to the corporations. Sadly, our government - that is morally and politically mandated to protect the poorest - continues to serve as a conduit for the most powerful.

It is a time for governments to rededicate themselves in words but backed up in concrete deeds that they will not be party to harming the poor any longer. And it is time for the NGOs and in particular international NGOs to give communities moral and political support so that mining communities can obtain a real voice and organisational power to defeat greed and destruction of their communities. The responsibility belongs to all of us. We write this as a contribution to healthy debate, but more so that we can work with others to make real impacts on the lives of the mining communities we work with.

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