



Media statement by the Bench Marks Foundation

New minister may listen to community voices

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Bench Marks Foundation has welcomed the appointment of Gwede Mantashe as the minister of mineral resources, adding that he may be the right person to fully grasp the industry and its impacts and listen to the voice of civil society and communities' concerns.

Executive Director of Bench Marks Foundation, John Capel, says: "The new minister once worked in a mine and, as former general secretary of the ANC, must be aware of the many negative impacts and the winners and losers' dichotomy.

"President Cyril Ramaphosa sees mining as sunshine industry, but the sun is only for some. Will he be committed to making it a sunshine industry for impacted communities and workers as well?" he asked.

He added: "If the mining sector is to become a 'sunshine' industry, it has to search for clean, democratic and empowering alternatives to community involvement. It also has to factor in concerns about water use and climate change."

"The poor and working people will not accept the obligation of saving the sector, while they die of poverty, marginalisation and illnesses directly related to mining. This externalisation of costs onto people and the environment must come to an end. We trust the new minister will be firm in this regard.

"The Foundation celebrates the recent court "victory" that ensures that mining communities and their organisations will be permitted to participate in drafting the revised mining charter, but we point out that this is but the beginning. The real test is whether mining communities that have since colonial times been systemically excluded from decision making in matters concerning their own lives will have the legal right in the MPRDA to talk for themselves.

"In addition, we believe that participation will be meaningless without the building of strong democratic mass organisations of the poor, with professional and quality technical support provided by the authorities. It follows that, since mining is not a solution for all, nor for all our problems, mining communities must have the right to say 'no' to mining and these wishes must be respected.

"Alternative forms of producing livelihoods need to be affirmed and supported by all the resources available in the democratic state. Punishing communities for choosing other developmental paths is anti-democratic and unjust and will be resisted," the Foundation said.

The Foundation pointed out that mining communities lack information and access to social justice.

“We therefore hope the new minister will support our work in levelling the playing fields between mines and communities. We need to strengthen community’s democratic and constitutional rights. Communities are severely disadvantaged when a mine arrives with promises that mining is investment and investment in them, only to suffer livelihood loss, land and be uprooted or impacted upon when they believed otherwise.

“Thus we have been calling on the industry to support an independent capacity building fund that allows communities access to specialist expertise and advice around environmental impact assessments, social and economic impacts so they can make informed decisions.

“In addition, communities have no real way to resolve problems. In this regard we are establishing the independent problem solving service that will use impartial facilitators to assist communities to resolve problems with the industry. We hope the new minister will be open to listen to a wide range of issues related to interest and impacted groups,” the Foundation said.

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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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