



Media statement by the Bench Marks Foundation

Respiratory ailments associated with living close to mine dumps

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Communities living in the shadows of Johannesburg's infamous mine dumps are at greater risk of respiratory illnesses than those of the city's leafy northern suburbs, a new study by the Bench Marks Foundation has found.

"Waiting to inhale", a study on household health and wellbeing in four mine-impacted communities in Johannesburg, is the twelfth in Bench Marks' Policy Gap series. The communities studied were Riverlea, Diepkloof, Meadowlands and Doornkop, all of which are situated close to one of the most intensely mined areas on the planet.

The research found that many residents of Riverlea, for example, are living on oxygen machines. The residents believe that dust from the nearby Mooifontein mine dump is contributing to the poor air quality that they experience, especially on windy days.

The three-year period over which the research extended coincided with one of the worst droughts in recent memory across South Africa. The normal windy season continued from August 2015 right through to September/October 2017.

More than half (56.1%) of residents identified respiratory ailments (cough, sinus, asthma and TB) as their most persistent ailment. Four per cent of respondents also reported eye problems.

Bench Marks says that the respiratory problems may be associated with dust from the surrounding mine operations and tailings, asbestos roofing and/or smoking. Almost all the surveyed houses (97%) in Riverlea had asbestos roofs, even though there has been a total ban on the use of asbestos in building materials since 2008. In addition, 574 cigarettes were smoked per day by various members of households.

However, 92% of the respondents believed their health problems were caused by surrounding mines.

"Their respiratory problems were not caused by the burning of coal, paraffin, or wood, as some mine studies of the community's health claim, given that 99% of the households had access to electricity, which was installed as long as 1988," the Bench Marks research said.

The study compared their findings to those of similar research conducted in Danville, Mafikeng, 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.

Only 25.6% of Danville residents suffer from respiratory problems – approximately half of those of Riverlea experiencing these challenges. Danville, however, has fewer asbestos roofs (52.6%) than Riverlea, where almost all of those surveyed had such roofs.

On the other hand, residents of another area surveyed, Diepkloof, also suffered from high levels of respiratory ailments, with 48.6 per cent complaining of cough, sinus, asthma and TB. Unlike Riverlea, however, there is a much lower occurrence (53.3%) of asbestos roofs in Diepkloof.

The research findings in these three communities suggest that mining activity could play a higher role in respiratory ailments than the prevalence of asbestos roofing, says Bench Marks Foundation. However, Bench Marks notes that it would require a proper epidemiological study to determine a direct correlations between tailings dust and respiratory problems in these communities, such as blood tests, to determine the presence or otherwise of toxic substances that might also be present in the mine waste.

Unfortunately, the Bench Marks Foundation does not have capacity of technology to carry out such a study.

The research team found that mining operations around Riverlea do not take dust pollution seriously, with only four dust sample buckets in the suburb. The residents also complain that the dust buckets are hardly ever collected, and, when they were, the companies responsible for them hardly ever provide feedback to the affected communities.

One dust sample bucket had been placed next to the community centre under a tree by Central Rand Golf (CRG). It was removed soon after the Bench Marks Foundation posted comments on Facebook regarding the shortcomings of placing a bucket under a tree.

In addition, the mining companies use a dust bucket design dating back to the 1970s, rather than the more modern and accurate means of measuring dust that are currently available.

Bench Marks Foundation says that the reason outdated systems of measuring dust are used is because profitability always appears to come before responsibility for the mining industry.

“Therefore mining companies will always go for the cheapest options when it comes to community health and the environment,” Bench Marks says.

ENDS

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- 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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