
Africa: "The more you know, the less gold glows"

"No Dirty Gold" is the consumer campaign launched on February 11, 2004, by Earthworks/Mineral Policy Center and Oxfam, intended to shake up the gold industry and change the way gold is mined, bought and sold. Right before and a few days after Valentine's Day --a major occasion for gold jewelry sales in the U.S.-- activists distributed Valentine's cards with the message, "Don't tarnish your love with dirty gold" in front of major jewelry and watch stores, including Cartier's and Piaget's on 5th Avenue in midtown New York City. Consumers are also asked to sign a pledge at the campaign website (www.nodirtygold.org).

The production of a single 18 Karat gold ring weighing less than an ounce generates at least 20 tons of mine waste. Metals mining employs less than one-tenth of one percent of the global workforce but consumes 7 to 10 percent of the world's energy. Eighty percent of gold is used to make jewelry. Most consumers don't realize that in Southern countries gold mining is associated with human rights abuses, and even imprisonment and death, along with environmental devastation.

As part of the campaign, Earthworks and Oxfam released the report "Dirty Metals: Mining, Communities and the Environment," (http://www.nodirtygold.org/dirty_metals_report.cfm) which details the massive pollution, huge open pits, devastating community health effects, worker dangers and, in many cases, human rights abuses that have become hallmarks of gold and metals mining in several countries. The report also shows that mining renders no wealth for the people and rather becomes the so-called "resource curse" for Southern countries such as Guinea, Niger, Zambia, Togo. Though their percentage of total export value from non fuel minerals is high (71, 67, 66, and 30 respectively), they have a high percentage of population below national poverty line (40, 63, 86, and 32 respectively). Mining becomes twofold a curse for local communities, which frequently suffer not only direct displacement but also a displacement of their traditional livelihoods.

Furthermore, mining targets places which are considered world heritage sites. Such is the case of gold mining in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, Democratic Republic of Congo, the Tai National Park, Côte d'Ivoire, Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, Uganda, and Kahuzi-Biega National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and iron ore mining in Mt. Nimba Strict Nature Reserve, Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire.

In the west African nation of Ghana, a country with extensive gold mines, the Ghanaian Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice issued a report in 2000 that found "overwhelming evidence of human rights violations occasioned by the mining activities, which were not sporadic but a well established pattern common to almost all mining communities." Between 1990 and 1998, more than 30,000 people in Tarkwa were displaced by gold mining operations. "Our people have suffered beatings, imprisonment, and murder for standing up for our community rights against multinational mining companies," said Daniel Owusu-Koranteng, a mining activist from the Tarkwa district. "We want buyers of gold to support our rights and demand that mining companies adhere to higher ethical standards."

An investigation by the Ghanaian community group WACAM (Wassa Association of Communities

Affected by Mining) found evidence that between 1994 and 1997, AGC (Ashanti Goldfields Company) security personnel, acting in conjunction with the police and the military, had killed three artisanal miners. In one incident in January 1997, 16 artisanal miners were severely beaten by AGC security personnel. WACAM also collected testimony from six other artisanal miners who say they were beaten and attacked by AGC security's guard dogs.

Even as a job source, mining is unsustainable. The destruction of the traditional employment base is followed by the loss of the mine itself. When ore deposits are exhausted, the jobs disappear. Most large-scale projects have a lifespan of between 10 and 40 years, after which the mining companies close up shop and move on to new projects. Any schools, clinics, and other services established by the companies usually lose their funding. When this happens, the miners and communities are generally left to fend for themselves. Since mining is specialized employment, miners typically have few other marketable job skills. There are few "just transition" programs, in which former mineworkers are retrained for other work. For these reasons, laid-off miners are likely to stay unemployed for long periods.

The social effect of these layoffs is often profound, because the miners generally have a large number of dependents (although the majority of them may not be in the mining communities themselves). According to an estimate by the South African Chamber of Mines, one in every eight people in southern Africa is economically dependent on mining. In South Africa itself, the world's largest gold producer, the gold mining industry laid off some 400,000 workers between 1985 and 2000 --nearly half its workforce-- thus depriving them and their numerous dependents of their sources of income.

The time has come to reform our "metals economy," reforming the way metals are produced, finding ways to use metals far more efficiently, and continuing using metals that are already in circulation. If some metals mining may be necessary, most important extraction operations should never take place in nature reserves and native lands.

"What we're asking for is reasonable, fair and possible," said Keith Slack, Senior Policy Advisor with Oxfam America. "The symbol of your enduring love should not have to come at the expense of clean drinking water or respect for human rights." "Gold doesn't seem so shiny when you consider the colossal damage gold mining inflicts," said Payal Sampat, International Campaign Director with Earthworks. "We're asking consumers to consider the real cost of gold, and we're enlisting their help to put an end to mining practices that endanger people and ecosystems."

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