
Mining is a problem, and as such should be treated

The concept of "sustainability" is increasingly being emptied of any content, particularly by those who carry out basically unsustainable activities. Among them, mention needs to be made of an activity which is --by definition-- unsustainable: mining. It can be argued that mining is necessary to provide people with a number of goods, but it can certainly not be argued that it can ever be sustainable, being as it is based on the extraction of non-renewable resources.

In spite of that, mining corporations are trying very hard to convince the public that they are "sustainable". With that aim in mind, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development --which represents many of the most destructive corporations in the world-- contracted the International Institute for Environment and Development --which describes itself as a non-profit organization-- to carry out "an independent two-year project of research and consultation seeking to understand how the mining and minerals sector can contribute to the global transition to sustainable development." The project has of course the necessary catchword "sustainable": the "Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development Project."

That project had, of course, a political aim and was part of the corporate lobbying activity for the inclusion of the absurd concept of "sustainable mining" in the official report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. In spite of the vocal opposition of anti-mining campaigners during the WSSD process, mining corporations were successful and mining was officially declared --as if by magic-- as "sustainable."

However, in the real world, to say that mining is unsustainable is really an understatement. Its impacts go far beyond what people normally understand as unsustainable. Mining is responsible for the loss of livelihoods of millions of people; it is at the root of numerous civil wars, dictatorships and foreign armed interventions; it is responsible for widespread human right abuses; it is responsible for poisoning people and the environment; it is one of the major direct and underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation. Those and many other impacts attached to mining are described in detail in the articles included in this bulletin.

It is true that humanity needs a certain amount of minerals to satisfy some of its --basic or otherwise-- needs. It is however equally true to say that overconsumption by one part of humanity is destroying the livelihoods and environments of the other humanity at the receiving end of mining.

Because of its impacts, mining is one of those activities that needs to be strictly controlled at all stages, from prospection and exploitation to transportation, processing and consumption. In many cases, strict control will simply mean prohibition. To pretend that mining corporations will control themselves is being more than naive: it's an absurdity. Even government control is insufficient, given the economic and political power that mining corporations have proven to have over them. Society as a whole must be empowered to participate directly in such control.

But above all, peoples living in mineral-rich areas should have the capacity to take fully-informed decisions on whether mining is to be allowed or not in their territories. In case they agree, they should

be empowered to decide on how this activity will be carried out, in order to ensure environmental conservation and social justice.

In spite of all its claims regarding "sustainability", mining is a major problem, and as such should be treated.