

COMMENTARIES

This section contains short versions of papers that were presented at the Mining in a Sustainable World conference (UNE, 13 to 15 October 2013). The papers were submitted by authors for inclusion in the journal but not for peer review.

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Planning for social sustainability in natural resource regions: The Colombian case

Isabel Buitrago-Franco

Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, Sustainable Minerals Institute, School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Management
The University of Queensland

Tathagata Chatterji

Faculty of Architecture, Planning and Design, Manipal University

Under the rubric of sustainable livelihood approach, the social sustainability of local communities has increasingly come to be recognised by international organisations as a crucial developmental objective. However implementation of such concepts, particularly in the context of mining and other forms of natural resource extracting economic activities from remote regions of the Global South, are problematic; social objectives frequently face counter narratives of economic growth and environmental conservation. To mitigate these conflicting demands, current development literature had emphasised reorienting the planning system by, firstly, devolving greater power from higher echelons of governance to local agencies and, secondly, making the planning process at the local level more participatory so as to accommodate the concerns of affected local communities. Our research, however, shows that devolution of planning responsibilities by themselves are inadequate to meet social sustainability objectives unless there is concurrent efforts to strengthen the capacity of the local agencies on planning matters. Our research is based on case studies of Antioquia and Risaralda, two mining districts of Colombia

In recent years, heightened global demand for natural resources is leading to an escalation of mining, oil and gas operations in Colombia. However, there is growing discontent among local communities who feel left out of this economic boom and remain stuck in poverty. Under these circumstances, the need for the corporate sector to be more involved in carrying out development works at the local level is recognised by higher levels of the Colombian government, local civil society activists and mining companies themselves. However, our research shows that social objectives are, to a large degree, handicapped due to capacity constraints in planning issues at the local agency level. Our findings draw attention to specific institutional deficiencies in political and technological terms that inhibit local agencies from playing stronger roles in multi-stakeholder scenarios concerned with planning for social sustainability in resource regions.

The weak institutional capacity of the Antioquia government has become an impediment for channelling gains from mining into sustainable livelihood opportunities. Due to poor planning practices and procedures, the compensation for natural resources extraction are being frittered away rather than being utilised to meet local development aspirations. In Risaralda, however, a stronger and better equipped local planning



agency had been able to forge together an effective developmental coalition, comprising of the mining corporate sector, and local civil society activists - which in turn contributed to greater employment generation and more focused infrastructure delivery. On the whole, the research highlights the crucial need for capacity building of the local planning agencies as a pre-requisite for achieving social sustainability objectives.



Mining for development - destructive and divisive: Eco-villages as an alternative form of development

Johanna Garnett
PhD Candidate
University of New England

In 2011 the Australian Federal Labor Government launched its 'Mining for Development Initiative' (MDI). The objectives of the MDI are to assist developing and poorer nations in developing a sustainable mining industry and to assist in the management of this mining industry once established. I believe, however, that the practices and processes of the MDI are unsustainable and environmentally, socially, economically and culturally destructive and divisive. Focusing on mineral extraction for state building is shortsighted and outdated because it ignores the long-term environmental, social, economic and cultural impacts. We should be considering alternatives for development.

To this end, I have been researching the growing 'localisation' movement and, in particular, the concepts of 'eco-villages' and 'permaculture'. Eco-villages are designed around the concept of local economies, community, self-sufficiency and more ecologically sound practices and processes. Eco-villages are models of alternative economic and social structures, practices and processes and, as such, offer an alternative paradigm to the dominant western world - one of unrestrained growth and materialism. Permaculture is a holistic practice aimed at integrating farming and living practices with local environments and eco-systems. It is gaining popularity as a sustainable design system in both rural and urban areas.

As part of my research, I spent a number of months earlier this year living on an 'eco-farm' in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) for a local grass-roots organisation, the Network for Environment and Economic Development (NEED) (<http://www.need-burma.org/>). Myanmar, a nascent democracy, and one of the least developed nation states in the world, is one of the intended recipients of the MDI. Myanmar is rich in natural resources but is also home to complex and fragile eco-systems, diverse ethnicities and traditional cultural practices. Seventy per cent of the population rely on agriculture for their livelihoods and there is continuing conflict between the ruling military junta and agrarian communities over land use and management.

The members of NEED share my concerns about top-down, environmentally damaging, development initiatives, like the MDI, and established the demonstration farm and residential educational facility in February 2013 in an effort to educate and empower local communities. Based on the tenets of eco-villages and permaculture, the model farm will provide young Burmese people from rural communities with an environmental education that will enhance their local and traditional knowledge and skills with new practices, processes and technologies.

Implementation of the MDI in Myanmar will result in concentrations of power and wealth, social and economic inequities and environmental insecurity and injustice. Aid money should not be used to promote Australia's mining interests. Shifting the development focus to grass-roots initiatives, such as those mooted by NEED, will result in diversification and stronger, more resilient communities.

