



UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

**CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: STEELWORX'S HIDDEN  
HAND TO SUFFERING IN SOUTH AFRICA'S STEEL VALLEY**

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Masters of Arts degree in Anthropology

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study focuses on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Steelworx a multinational conglomerate which sets itself in South Africa's Steel Valley. Due to an issue of current debate on the newly emerging powers in the field of resource exploitation in Africa, framed in terms of their national identities as new players; (China and India). The emergence of Asian owned investments has been met with much scepticism and indifference in some quarters. Mining corporations in South Africa have generally been guilty of unethical practices and co-opting workers into a system which allows investors to go unscathed due to their failures to ethical responsibilities and causing a great deal of suffering. I look at the adverse effects on the livelihood of workers and community members and the intervention by Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). With an objective to uncover how CSR unfolds and deals with suffering in the Steelworx as an Indian owned operation. I map out the daily lives of some of the afflicted workers and members of the community using critical ethnography. I also look at the diverse agents and local conditions (the economic and political landscape) that enable their interaction/ interplay with workers, the unions, communities and compensation laws when exercising their social responsibility. This study shows that Steelworx's takeover from a racialized operation has a set of different priorities in embarking their CSR mandate, CSR is used as a marketing ploy, while philanthropic gestures are made, the company ignores the much pertinent aspects of the community where its operations in and where they have meted out harm, further exacerbating poverty and suffering. Government has absolved its power and the fate of the workers and community has been left in the hands of the MNC, bringing about contentious questions of how far the government mandate should go in looking after its citizens. The company has engaged itself in constant running battles with community and pressure groups as an indication that CSR is failing where the company is producing harm.

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## DECLARATION

I hereby certify that that this material , which I now submit for assessment on the program of study leading to the award of MA is entirely my own work. That I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the next work.

Signed.....

Student Number.....708984

Date.....18 September 2017

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

CBD	– Central Business District
CEO	– Chief Executive Officer
COIDA	– Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Disease Act
CSR	– Corporate Social Responsibility
EC	– European Commission
ILO	– International Labour Organisation
ICT	– Imperial Crown Trading
JSE	– Johannesburg Stock Exchange
KZN	– KwaZulu-Natal
MNCs	– Multinational Companies
MBOD	– Medical Bureau for Occupational Diseases
NEPA	– National Environment Protection Act
PAIA	– Promotion of Access to Information Act
ODMWA	– Occupational Diseases in Mines and Works Act
OHS	– Occupational Health and Safety
SHE	– Safety, Health and Environment
SW	– Steelworks
TB	– Tuberculosis

TNC	– Transnational Company
VEJA	– Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance
WHO	– World Health Organisation



## INTRODUCTION

Does Steelworx's CSR initiative alleviate suffering in the lives of Steel Valley people? What are the complexities underlying the practice of CSR in the Steel Valley? Through critical ethnography I set out to see the specificities of this particular location and how they bring about undesirable outcomes for the community. Through my own experience of working and training in this type of environment I learnt that corporations do little to support their workers and communities suffering from economic disadvantages. They have little sense of the challenges faced by their employees and rather have a business-like approach to these challenges with their employees and communities. I watched at times how workers would enter into perilous situations as though oblivious of the dangers that came with the work. It was easy to get programmed and find nothing wrong, as it became a way of life as one becomes desensitised. This is the life in the "apparatus of harm production" as Welker (2014) calls it. I was exposed to the extraction enclaves at a young age and came to learn that "life is seldom fair" as my old schoolmaster would say. Although I was fortunate enough to work in the management structures and enjoyed the perks that came with it, I was also privileged enough to see "both sides of the coin." Being young and having experienced race and class discrimination, now I was incorporated into a culture of exercising that "disciplinary power" (Foucault 1978).

Since the 1990s there has been a growing concern over the power and influence of the Multinational Companies (MNCs) and their impact on human rights, the environment and employment (Cutler 2006; Utting 2000; Winston 2002; Levy & Newell 2005). Many now regard them as new forms and symbols of imperialism and colonialism. Because of such attacks many global corporations have tried to adopt good corporate citizenship through what they call CSR. "Corporate social responsibility is a global business trend that is becoming

increasingly prevalent in South Africa's private sector, and presents itself as an important topic for anthropological inquiry” (Sharp 2006: 213). Many scholars (e.g. Kemp 2010; Brammer 2012) have written about how CSR has a role in situating itself in the deeper structural problems rooted in the lives of corporations, particularly those corporations located in third world countries. Hence the importance of this study. The question of CSR centres on ethics and morals in guiding corporations to behave in a particular way as they operate their businesses. Juggling financially sound and harmful acts is essential. Therefore, this assumes that companies engaging in CSR have an obligation of fixing the environment and the people they cause harm and suffering to. Not only should they alleviate the suffering they create but should also meet the governments’ shortfalls in the communities where they operate while trying to make a profit. Multinational Companies (MNCs) are no doubt powerful bodies, especially to those communities they find themselves located in, particularly in the developing world. “But this power does not mean that their stated intentions are simply processed through their structures to achieve the desired results” (Sharp 2006: 218). A bone of contention also arises as to how far they should go in exercising CSR. Should they assume public service duties that are seen as government’s role, i.e. building public infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, public transport, free medication, etc.?

When I was at Steel Valley I was to discover that there are insidious and subjective experiences that are inconspicuous and need deeper understanding. Powerful corporations engage in activities that culminate in rapid changes in social relations and in the behaviour of the powerless, resulting in their becoming “...objects of change rather than its agents” (Frost 2008: 447). Victor Munnik’s infamous report on Matsepo, which I shall later look at, depicts this very well – the large corporation’s treacherous side.

The occupational hazards from the plant are only challenged by pressure groups. The trade unions have been rendered impotent and fragmented, while government has absolved itself.

The political will and agency that drove people in the 1980s and before – rent strikes, industrial action etc., – is now a thing of the past.

The Steel Company has an exemplary CSR project, or does it? It is admired by beneficiaries who are awed by the amount of investment they pump into the community. This is how Steelworx operates in Steel Valley. The community is characterised by a lack of resources in terms of income, and overstretched housing and health facilities. Occupational health problems and HIV/AIDS are leading causes of death in Steel Valley. Suffering is a recurrent condition *“I fall down the stairs from my flat almost everyday because of my condition,”* said Kenny (whom I shall later introduce) one day in a rather casual manner, *“but I’m used to it now.”*

Thousands of people living under these circumstances expect to meet similar fates to that of Kenny and other victims. What these people have in common is sharing a place at the bottom end of society’s ladder in a capitalist system, more than they share their culture, language and/or race. The individuals’ stories of suffering and hardship I shall share illustrate the manner through which these unobtrusive forces shape their realities.

## METHODOLOGY

The accounts I intend to give on the phenomenon act as a window on the kinds of encounters I experienced, and are not reflective of the entire steel industry in South Africa beyond Steel Valley. I used critical ethnography because it is a form of disciplined curiosity that attempts to uncover invisible hegemonic practices that perpetuate injustices and social inequalities. For the population group I was studying, critical ethnography allows for a fair and sensitive assessment of people’s lives. This study was done in the etic mode. The purpose of this was to get a much broader abstraction and general knowledge of the human condition. This

approach is important in showing the social life and systems which may look different and yet are similar when closely scrutinised. With critical ethnography I also used people's own models and categories, and uncovered their everyday experiences and linked them to broader social structures and systems of power relationships.

### **Participant Selection and Settings**

I used a general purposive sample to ensure the acquisition of information pertaining to this study. With the exception of George Kahn (consent given) and some reports from previous studies and court case files, all other participants were assigned pseudonyms in the field notes, interviews, and final report. All the respondents were interviewed and observed in different locations. I chose to interview management officials in their work environment at Steelworx, primarily to give them the convenience of access to their corporation's related data, should they have needed to give me statistical and or archival information. I also looked at the narratives of the daily lives of the workers at Steelworx whom I followed for several weeks in their communities to understand their living conditions and what the influences on their socio-political, cultural or economic conditions were. The greater part of the interviews were conducted in the participants' houses or the surrounding community. The reason for doing interviews with employees outside the plant was to get them where they were most comfortable, without fear or intimidation of their employer, the general purpose being to elicit more information from them than they generally would in the work environment.

### **Data Sources and method of collection**

**Semi-structured interviews:** Several qualitative data sources were used to acquire information, using key evaluation questions. All questions employed were open-ended and semi-structured. This style of interview was to allow participants to speak at length, and openly

too, about their personal experiences and about the company. In some instances the interviews were conducted in isiZulu, particularly for the blue collar employees. English was used for the white collar staff, and in some instances a mixture of the two languages. There was no barrier in language i.e. no difficulty was encountered in language translation. Most of the interviews were done outside the plant. Two individual interviews occurred at Steelworx with employers. A digital recorder was used in some cases and written notes were also used in places where they were permitted. This was in order to capture the participants' stories quite precisely. Later these conversations were transcribed. Generally all the interviews started out as a set of tentative questions which in most cases allowed the creation and guiding of subsequent sets of questions. There was a broad set of questions, from ones which touched on participants' understanding of the company's corporate culture and how the company envisioned its social responsibilities, to questions that touched on the participants' personal lives. Each individual interview was based on the participant's role or relation to the plant, and in some cases a template was used for individuals in the same circumstances. I had an opportunity to see some of the participants twice, thus giving my inquiry much more depth as I was able to return to them after some observations. Most interviews lasted 35-45 minutes, but in some cases an hour or longer, especially in places where the participants were in their social settings and seemed much more comfortable to elaborate their stories. While most of the interviews took place outside the premises of the plant there were two particular ones which were conducted in office spaces. This presented difficulties in getting unbiased opinion and answers. In addition to the two individual interviews with the two employers, there was a combination of a semi-structured interview with one of the workers and a series of unstructured interviews from another two different interlocutors. The purpose of the unstructured interviews was generally to allow uninterrupted expression by respondents. This

was a method I found myself using in conversations where no questions were planned in instantaneous interviews.

**Observations:** In my observational method I engaged in multiple-study sites from the peri-urban townships to the actual plant itself. The observational data was to be integrated as explanatory or exploratory research. The data sourced in observation was supplemented by field notes. Unsure of what behaviours a tentative observation would uncover, I therefore decided to register some of my experiences as they took place, looking for relevant practices and occurrences.

## **Ethical Considerations**

**Consent:** The entire informed consent process involved the following,

- i)* Providing sufficient information with regards to the research.
- ii)* Making sure the participants had the liberty to consider all available options  
responding to the subjects' questions.
- iii)* Making sure that they comprehend the information that I provided to them.
- iv)* I also made sure that I acquired their voluntary consent in seeking and sourcing  
further information as the situation would require.

Documentation involved my supplying the participants with a written consent form. The form contained relevant information with regards to the study, which the participants had to sign. The information included but was not limited to:

- The purpose of the study;
- Why they had been invited to the study,

- Their prerogative to take part and the benefits of participating (in this case, none)
- What they needed to do if they wanted to take part, and
- Where the research results would end up, with contact details for further information.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity:** The information provided by the participants was to be kept confidential and was not to be shared with anyone, and no names were required. In the case where names were involved, aliases or codes were used to protect the identity of the participants. No other identifying information was used, such as employee number, etc. The information acquired was kept in a computer with a password only accessible by me, the researcher. This is keeping in line with the ethical obligations of the research and to protect the identity of the participants.

### **Limitations/ Possibilities**

Although risks and harm were not foreseen, in the event that they might have been a threat or risks of endangerment, the participants were assured that the information they provided was not be shared unless there was a possibility that someone might have been hurt. Studying a National Key Point (NKP) has its challenges. Being a protected area, recording of any sort and access to certain areas was forbidden within the NKP (see page 66). Time was also limited in gathering some of the data. CSR being a contentious subject, one would understand why that is the case as well.

### **Role of Researcher and Subjectivity**

In order to capture the experiences and discourses around Steelworx as a mining plant, it was imperative that I had to be open to my interlocutors, whom I would write with and for. Hence, my identity would need clarity as a young black scholar who sought to investigate the



social responsibility of the company with a particular vested interest. My position in this study has many dimensions. I assumed the role of an observer in the plant and in the community of Sebokeng, documenting the role of the corporation in its natural context.

Schwandt (2000) asserts that ultimately researchers must ask the fundamental question of the way in which they ought to be towards the people they are studying, to determine what behaviours to exhibit during the research inquiry. A methodology that exposes the participants to little discomfort should be employed, and also one that sets off minimal anxiety while achieving its intended purpose. I paid particular attention as to how my questions were received by my interlocutors. Any question that brought discomfort was re-phrased or omitted. My judgement, personal opinions and feelings came as a result of my personal connection to the participants. Desiring in some cases to confide in me about their personal struggles, the interlocutors made me become their unofficial confidant. My relationship with the participants was shaped by the interviewer/participant relation. These roles were critical for me, in giving me faith and confidence in my data. My familiarity with the plant, from having worked in a similar environment with also a similar historical background and labour relations, weighed in on my favour. Participants' recruitment was not a difficult task. Although sceptical at first, their identification with me as firstly, a student, secondly a "black" person, produced the assumption of a common historical background of being previously disadvantaged. There was an inferred intersubjectivity which allowed them to have some level of comfort during their interviews. It would be untrue to say racial identity, ethnicity and language did not play a role in my data collection, particularly when it came to exercising certain protocols in addressing people of different age, ethnic backgrounds and general communication and interaction.

NB: – The terms *interlocutors*, *respondents*, *participants*, and *informants* are used

Interchangeably, and



– *The company* refers to Steelworx in this report.

## **Vanderbeijlpark and the Surrounding Area**

### **History and background**

Located south of Johannesburg; it takes approximately 70 kilometres to reach what has become the South African headquarters for the steel company. Vanderbeijlpark has become home of the international steel producing giant Steelworx. Unlike the towns of the Witwatersrand, whose growth was as a result of gold production, Vanderbeijlpark's legacy is as a result of producing steel from as far back as the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Administered by the Emfuleni municipality, it has a sister town approximately ten kilometres east, with Vereeniging and Sasolburg (under its own municipality) approximately seven kilometres south constituting what is known as the Vaal triangle. This is where the country's largest steel, engineering, chemical and petroleum industries are concentrated. The estimated population of the area is a little above 100, 000 with the majority of its residents living in the nearby poverty stricken townships of Boipatong, Bophelong, Bonnane, Sebokeng, and several other nearby areas. These townships have political significance in the fight against apartheid. When Vanderbeijlpark was first founded in 1943, it catered for no more than 30,000 white inhabitants and was run by a vigilance committee which saw to general service delivery. The growth in this town has always been attributed to the expansion of the steel companies, National Steel (NS) at the time, and a few subsidiary industries. It had the makings of the development of a modern town of that time: public schools, hospital and health facilities, and impeccable fire and ambulance services catering for first class residents.

In 1948 a housing scheme was built for the single black male workers who had no accommodation when the steel operations began in the year before. Most black workers had found themselves residing in corrugated iron huts in surrounding farms as a temporary

measure before those huts were replaced with hostels for 2,000 single males in 1955. Boipatong and Bophelong were established as townships, with normal sewage and water facilities provided. Sebokeng was established ten years after Boipatong and Bophelong and was the administrative headquarters for non-European affairs. These townships later became synonymous with violence in the mid-1980s for their refusal to pay extra service charges to the then Lekoa municipality. Its impoverished residents felt they were unduly taxed for services which government should have been subsidising. As much as similar amenities were provided for the black workers in the townships they were not nearly as up to standard as those of their white counterparts. National Steel, which played a paternalistic role at that time in the community, provided the National Steel Medical Benefit Fund and provided a room for medical consultation in a house close to the Vanderbeijlpark Central Business District (CBD). This medical attention, however, was exclusive to the white population. It is such disparities based on race and colour which led to a lot of civic groups, labour unions, black conscious and youth movements to fight ferociously against the local council. Even though these groups had different ideologies, they felt they had a common goal in a fight against their local government.

## **OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

Chapter One gives a background history of the company Steelworx and how it developed over the years, from the parastatal to the merging of two international giants to become what it is now. No doubt their aspiration to be a global player in South Africa was inspired by neo-liberal policies, which include CSR as a new global trend. I look at how the new government of SA in 1990 was embracing the same policy and opened its doors to such players. But as it

turns out these economic policies are not providing quite what the locals expected. They divided and neutralised some activist labour unions and government has almost absolved itself of most of its power. I also give a little insight on mining medicine, which to a great degree is responsible for the institutionalised violence we see in mining towns. It is important to have a background history of how it operated and how it was used. To this day the basis of oppression that miners and other extractive industry workers experience emanates from there. In this initial chapter, I try to define two fundamental concepts the report discusses: corporate social responsibility and suffering as a result of structural violence and illness.

Chapter Two briefly looks at the history of the contamination of the environment, and how it began. I show pollution as being rampant in Steel Valley, and how it has developed over time and the damage it has had on both the environment and the inhabitants. I draw attention to Steelworx's failure to meet social expectations in rehabilitating the environment and also indicate through reports, by two very active pressure groups on the ground, the extent of harm Steelworx causes to the community. The demise of the community is as a result of the callousness of Steelworx, from toxin exposure to the measly compensation and minimal wages. With economic globalisation, the global markets have not only been an area of contestation by the Transnational Companies (TNCs) but also for environmental and corporate watchdogs. Corporations are faced with increasing pressure to act responsibly, through collaborative efforts between pressure groups across the global village.

I introduce two activist groups – Vaal Environmental Justice Association (VEJA) and Bench Marks Foundation (BMF) – whom I regard as having definitive knowledge of Steelworx's impact on the community. Their authority of knowledge comes from the years of constant running battles with the steel giant and the incisive research studies they carried out on both the company and the community. I discuss their reports and some of my participants' experiences at work and social lives, and the inevitability of the price of steel in the

community: death. Death has become imminent for some community members due to the toxic production of steel. Matsepo and Alinah are typical examples of this perilous production (Munnik 2002). I draw on the life and living conditions of one particular afflicted former employee of Steelworx, his family and his daily struggles with the disease. In an attempt to give a picture of what the living conditions are in the contemporary lives of black people at the Vaal, I shed light on the general life and living conditions in the Vaal townships, as a transition to the next chapter.

Chapter Three depicts how dismal and risky job conditions are, not only as a cause of indigence but also as a result of it. “Findings confirm that extremely poor people are not only disproportionately drawn into high risk and unhealthy jobs but also the accidents and health problems that arise from these jobs exacerbate poverty” (Akram 2014: 2). Some employees in the extractive industries suffer from a combination of occupational and communicable diseases in their seeking of pleasure. Young women are drawn by lack of money into risky and hazardous relationships, while others find each other and network to give each other support in the form of social capital as their reprieve. Generally the chapter also reflects on failed CSR. These shed light on where the company’s heart is, which is not in poverty alleviation but promoting its image.

In Chapter Four, I narrate my arrival story to the plant and my observation of the general atmosphere at the steel plant. The workers’ mood and narratives give an indication of the conditions the employees work under. I try to look at the different perspectives of corporate social responsibility from the working staff, the company policy, and some members of the community. The compensation law is also an important piece of legislation by which companies abide. It is one of the determinants of how the companies approach and deal with their employees in a health and safety predicament. These are old laws. Even though they have been amended, they still cater for the more privileged members of the working class and

they perpetuate some level of social exclusion for afflicted employees. I try also to draw similarities with the recent class action act lawsuit that made national news headlines at the beginning of last year 2016. Thousands of gold miners afflicted with silicosis are seeking to sue 30 gold mining companies (former employers) over their health conditions.

## CHAPTER 1

### “THE MORE THINGS CHANGE THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME”

This chapter tells the story of Steelworx from its inception. I highlight some of the significant historical events that may have well influenced its operations in the past and present and the suffering of the surrounding community and workers. From the mining industry’s medical apparatus, which saw the human body as expendable and ignored its productive capacity, to the neo-liberal capitalist policies, I reveal its influence on the current South African state and on the political muscle of labour unions. Despite the change in regime, how much has really changed for the impoverished? I make an attempt at understanding phenomena of *suffering* that occur as a consequence of these discriminatory and oppressive events. I also define the concept of *Corporate Social Responsibility* that is meant to assume the mitigating role in suffering, asking how much of this it plays?

#### **Steelworx’s History and Background**

Steelworx South Africa was born out of a merger between two large steel companies in 2004, National Steel and a French Steel company. Founded in 1976 by its current chairman, it set up its headquarters in Luxembourg. National Steel had been in existence since 1928 as a statutory parastatal. Their first steel operations were in Pretoria, the demand of their product being precipitated by World War II, which largely expanded their output in 1942 for the use of spare parts for ships, armoured vehicles and ammunition. After the war, in 1947, an integrated effort to build steel works was adopted in Vanderbeijlpark by the company and later in the year it began trading on the JSE. To date Steelworx is the biggest steel manufacturer in sub-Saharan Africa. It has a production capacity amounting to several

millions of tonnes of liquid steel per annum. Steelworx also has an employment capacity of over 4500 employees in SA alone.

Steelworx's take over from National Steel is a result of the global trend that started in the Thatcher and Reagan era of Globalisation. The company was taking over a parastatal that was racialized in its operation, hence one part of its conditions of purchase was to redress the imbalances created by the parastatal. This has proven to be a challenge.

In order to make sense of the company's operations it is important to understand the political and economic landscape in the country, and indeed globally.

### **Influence of Neo-liberalism and Capital Power**

In 1994 the new democratic government of South Africa joined the ranks of the neo-liberal world by opening up the economy to global competition. They liberalised the economy through scrapping capital controls and tariffs, resulting in many previously SA owned companies turning to multi-national companies (Cosatu Press Statements 2016). The hope was to enfranchise the poor, and public policies were to be de-racialised. The idea was to create equal opportunity for all, and decent living standards. Many companies found it unsustainable to survive under such competition, and therefore found it more desirable to split into separate companies. National Steel was one such company. When National Steel privatised, thousands of workers lost their jobs due to this restructuring exercise, turning SA companies into what COSATU terms "footloose global companies."

### **Exploitation and Corruption**

One afternoon while watching the news on television I had a flash back about a couple of youths I saw pulling carts in Vanderbeijlpark. At the time of seeing them it seemed insignificant because that is a common feature even in Johannesburg. What made these men

noticeable is how through the scorching heat of the sun they seemed to pull their trolleys full of scrap metal with great determination, seemingly unperturbed by the high temperatures. Like the ones I am used to seeing in Johannesburg, who collect plastics for recycling, they always manoeuvred in the middle of the road, at times having to dodge heavy traffic apart from the haulage trucks. Fortunately, traffic is not so heavy in the industrial sites of the Steel Valley. I watched these two cart pullers literally drag racing into the distance. These flashbacks were triggered by the news report that a R1,5 billion fine had been imposed on Steelworx after they were found guilty by the competition commission of racketeering and price fixing which was said to prejudice the consumer.

The significance of it is that, on consulting a learned friend in the legal department at the company, he had told me, as we were having a casual chat about my research, that scrap metal dealing is rife within huge steel companies, and he also told me how middle men are often outsourced by the conglomerates to collect scraps from the “cart pulling racers” for a measly income, at times making barter trade. The big companies then collect from the middle men for reasonably low prices after the scrap has accumulated in bulk. This is the material that is used in the coke ovens in the manufacturing of steel. The steel giant had formulated a cartel which determined the price of the scrap metal and steel. The cartels made sure they monopolised the buying and selling of scrap, keeping other competitors out of the market. The resulting outcome from this is that the people who are the primary source of the scrap metal – “scavengers” as they call them – are prejudiced on the price. The people who dig through the junk yards and dirt and get exposed to all sorts of dangers, just to make enough tonnage to earn an income, nonetheless dance to what the cartel offers, which in some cases is a pair of shoes or just a meal for all the hard work. *“It’s actually better than nothing, because these guys get to eat something at the end of the day,”* my friend said.



It is heart wrenching when I think of those words sometimes. Although he had told me long before the news reports came out, it is only after seeing the news reports that it hit me. The extent to which the poor would go to eat (in the literal sense) was brought to my attention. It does not help the situation to think we were seated at a restaurant in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg when he explained this to me. Yes, feelings of guilt sometimes tend to arise, although we are not responsible. Even though in some of his rhetoric he sounded insensitive, the truth is, it is the big system that was exploiting the small man. Although my friend was part of the system I did not blame him for it, I understood pretty well he was just an employee: a pawn, so to speak, in a bigger chess game.

In a mining weekly publication, the Steelworx admitted guilt to the charges and negotiated a payment settlement. It is not surprising how the company would get caught up in such publicity in light of the other reports in previous years. The company had not repented, but then again is repentance synonymous with capitalist accumulation?

Arguably, democracy has opened doors for neo-liberal capitalists to wield power over governments. Under the pretext of economic efficiency, they conceal their ideological base. The current global political economy is shaped by policies of neo-liberal capitalism that conceal the dispossession and infringement of the social and civic liberties in the guise of market liberties. Civil liberties and market liberties are not the same (Barber 2001).

Neoliberalism has increased the corporations' hold on the plight of the poor as well as on the environment, and limits the state's power in the face of the extension of capital accumulation. In the same light Giroux (2002) says there is a corporate takeover of public life and of spaces where moral visions are meant to be organised but have been dissipated. This limits state and civil society in making them accountable, making difficult the addressing of moral issues in systematic and political terms. It undermines the meaning and understanding of democracy in

addressing social injustice. The giving way of money over politics has created new forms of despotism in the form of corporations. There is an air of arrogance in the company's demeanour. Flouting regulations is one of their common deeds. A contract worker at Steelworx I chatted with seemed to concur with the statement,

*"This company seems to have either no capacity or the interest in dealing with our welfare. The reason why many people don't say anything is fear of victimisation or that they might be fired."*

Although there was no clear proof of such claims, and no known person I could report of that had been fired on such grounds, the people I spoke to seemed to be sure their fears were real.

The emergence of corporate power and its orientation to the demands of world economic order has switched the responsibilities of the personal to that of social responsibility and public service. Unfortunately social responsibility has been left to institutions which spearhead capital accumulation leaving communities and society with little and in some instances no protection by their state custodians.

Labour unions played a paternalistic role in the past and challenged the company's activities that caused suffering to the working masses. The question to ask is what has changed?

### **The Labour Unions and Lost Comradeship**

Dating back from the days of National Steel (NS) to the period it was privatised as Steelworx South Africa, labour movements such as National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) have been very important agents in the evolving conditions around corporate responsibility in South Africa. If one traces the genealogy of resistance against social and labour injustices, it is hard to dispel the role of unions such as NUMSA as protagonists in these fights. In the 1980s they waged struggles for black workers together with the

surrounding communities, particularly against companies like NS. NUMSA shop stewards campaigned ferociously during the period of the Vaal uprisings, and even fought against the privatization of NS. These events underscore the show of power and the importance of creating an alliance against prejudice and exploitation by large corporations. What is most baffling is their restrained approach to the current unfair practices in the Steel valley.

The Vaal triangle is not as politically charged as it used to be. The mass mobilisation of the labour unions has taken a different trajectory from what it used to have. *"I don't see the reason why I should sign up with any of these unions,"* said Jabulani, as I shall call him, a very vocal middle-aged gentleman from Sebokeng Township. Jabulani works at Steelworx, forever smiling and cracking jokes with his colleagues and mates, hence the name I accorded him (Jabula meaning happy in isiNguni). Well built in stature with a visibly strong forearm and bicep, one would assume from striking iron in his workplace with a hammer everyday (a blue collar stereotype), I was not sure where Jabulani was stationed exactly.

*"We work very hard and our union members do not stand up for us anymore."* I was very curious why this was the case, he answered with what seemed to be the general discourse around the Vaal area. *"Most of these guys are deployed by their head office in Johannesburg, and they come here to get work promotion in the company."*

One thing that was apparent about the union shop stewards was their unavailability. They were constantly in meetings, workshops or conferences. There was some talk around by workers that the shop stewards build their profiles for management positions, so their attention to the workers' welfare had receded a lot, especially on matters that they found in contradiction with the company. In other quarters I also heard that there was the fear of shutting down the company which would result in the loss of income for many families in the region. The primary reason that rendered the unions in many instances ineffective in dealing

with serious concerns of the company flouting regulations and impeding workers' human rights will always be speculated. This was part of the discursive power the company had. On the other front the alliance of the labour unions with the ruling party meant could mean the unions adopt a much more subtle approach to the economic policies and not undermine ANC stance on the economic policies as the ruling party's popularity is waning off.

## **History of Mining Medicine and Health**

Needless to say the background history of health in South Africa's extractive and manufacturing industries is of great significance. This history can be traced back to the political and socio-economic climate of the country. Considering the country's dark historical past with the apartheid and colonial legacy, workers experienced unprecedented forms of exploitation and segregation. Many workers found themselves exposed to hazardous and toxic conditions leading to occupational diseases from their job operations. At the time workers' welfare never really found itself in the colonial or apartheid government's agenda. It must be said that South Africa was "the first to compensate for Silicosis and tuberculosis as occupational diseases" (McCulloch 2013: 21). Even though this may have been the case, the compensation was designed for a privileged race at the time (the white minority). Under this sub-topic I demonstrate how hegemonic powers exercised their political, economic and epistemic influence to create suffering for the black labourers.

South African researchers were key in disseminating authoritative knowledge on respiratory diseases which were a result of occupational hazards (Braun and Kisting 2006). Activists and scholars have shown however that extractive industries fully success managed to suppress, manipulate and distort the knowledge on occupational diseases for about a century, just to ensure that the mining operations continued. The understanding of the causation of lung disease has a history of epistemic violence stemming from the way scientific knowledge was

used in a limiting way, making the epidemic almost invisible. Mining medicine constructed its human bodies as objects for periodic examinations. Africans deemed to be diseased were banished to the confines of the reserves.

Upon recruitment African workers were put in either three categories, those for *detention*, *fattening* or *rejection*. Constant weighing was done at the end of each contract and one's reinstatement would be dependent on the examination outcome, bearing in mind also that the power of the examination lay within the authorities conducting the analysis (the Medical Doctor).

Butchardt (1996) relates how Dr George Turner in 1906 was used to make an analysis of mine workers in Bantustans. Using a tape measure, a weighing scale and a lens, his equipment was to invasively examine the miners' bodies through chest measuring and forced nude stripping to weigh body mass and measuring height as a way for recruiters to discriminate and judge the miners according to their physique.

This medical gaze was used to dehumanise and impose dehumanising regulations on the workers, through scientific knowledge which only they, the mining authorities, had authority over.

Elusive cultural differences amongst black workers were constructed through these examinations, which made individual bodies primitive. In the course of developing a standard selection of individuals, "Turner's report somewhat dramatically suggests how early mine doctors invented the migrant African miner in the course of attempting to develop standards for the selection of individuals" (Butchardt 1996: 191).

Structural violence is manifested again in the design of the compounds the workers lived in. Meant for disease control during the period 1880-1920, mining medicine created the need for

mining capital to design houses that would prevent the spread of disease. Through their limited understating then, mining medicine's discourse believed high levels of carbon-dioxide were the cause of the spread of diseases (Butchardt 1996). The huts were built up in an open square with openings on either side for forced ventilation. In the middle was the manager's office where he could monitor the entire square from his office and the movements of workers (almost like a prison system). It was only in the 1920s that it was discovered that the transmission of diseases was through direct and indirect contact. In a medical report by Dr AJ Orenstein he wrote,

*"The great anti-hygienic factor in the compounds is of course the large number of people under one roof, something much better must be provided to counteract the effect of this bringing together of thousands of people from various parts of the country and from various tribes and races of different susceptibility of disease"* (Orenstein 1947: 122).

This is an indication of how the workers were recruited and monitored and self-consciously forced to live under these violent conditions, leaving them prone to diseases such as TB, pneumonia, parasitic infections and hookworm, traumatic injury and death. It is not only a historical context of suffering but a manifestation of how structural forces appear and inflict suffering. From contemporary experiences, suffering in South Africa's black labour system has defined itself as a recurrent and an expected condition. All this caused by capitalist interest and an overlap of racist policies. Mining medicine as an all-encompassing apparatus made a huge contribution, particularly in the first 50 years, to the degradation, hardship and pain of migrant mine labourers. Structural conditions were constructed which created distress for the labourer. Despite all of this information there is no measure to the amount of suffering the labourers endured. What is discernible is that patterns of political and economic development impacted heavily on black South Africans. TB is argued to be one of the outcomes of the industrial development in South Africa. It weighed heavily on the socio-

economic conditions of the African population until today suffering is very apparent in the communities all too often because of bureaucratic responses to social violence which intensifies suffering, as we shall see in chapters ahead. But through what mechanisms is suffering experienced? To answer this question we need to understand what the concept of suffering is, and how we make sense of it.

### **Making Sense of and Defining Suffering**

Suffering has become a new area for anthropological study, replacing the study of the modern-primitive according to El-Or (2000). Studying cultures in areas where there is no road access or where the inhabitants wear skins is no longer appealing. “Post-colonial theory has challenged dominant narratives and values (including ethical narratives), thus making the binary division of modern/ primitive useless for the anthropological enterprise and leaving suffering as a strategically rich speaking position” (El-Or 2000: 3). This trend has become a priority in the form of what El-Or calls the “zones of suffering” in contemporary anthropology and posits itself as a legitimate determination for objects of inquiry (2000: 3).

“Social Suffering is an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience” (Kleinman, Das & Lock 1997 in Broderick and Traverso: 52). There are more open forms of suffering such as premature and painful illness, structural violence through social exclusion and racism. How can we recognise or find out what structural violence is in order to see its hidden hand in human suffering? What are these structural forces in the South African context, and how do they manifest themselves?

Take for instance Sibongile, a woman I met at the local clinic. I did not engage with her much but I remember her from the small chat we had, with her three children and a baby in her arms that cried constantly. Although she was not a Steelworx employee she lived and worked



in the community and literally scraped through to get by in life, sometimes living off Steelworx company food donations. Sibongile had brought in her little baby who was diagnosed with head complications which she was convinced was caused by lead poisoning from her water source.

*“I have been living in the township for 28 years. (I assumed that was pretty much her age too)...My baby is constantly sick and I have no one to care of him, I’m afraid I could end up losing my job cause I’m always absent from work I don’t make a decent income,”* she said. *“I also get paid by the hour...as you can see from the way he’s crying I can’t sleep at night he keeps me awake. Since I can’t work today I don’t expect much,* she claimed. *I need to feed my kids and buy medication for this one”* (nodding her head towards the baby in her arms) as she continued.

We may identify forms of suffering, but how then do we say who suffers more? Suffering is difficult to define as there is no particular rubric to measure who suffers more than the other however, there is a close linkage between personal problems and societal problems (Das 1997). Anthropologists look at social forces in the broader social matrix in which these experiences are embedded and try to understand how they are transformed to individual experiences (Farmer 1996).

It is common knowledge that there is air pollution and water contamination in the Steel Valley. There are awareness campaigns on the toxins. Some people use their own experiences to make sense of their suffering. The complexities of contamination come as a result of not knowing the extent or severity of poisoning in one’s body—leading to the term the “silent killer”—and understanding the difference between suffering as a result of poverty or being poor because of suffering e.g. job loss because of debilitating circumstances that render one incapacitated.



*“I know people who have worked with my uncle George for many years at the steel plant but are healthy...maybe it’s because I’m still new at the company, but I’ve never coughed in one single day since I started working,” Themba reported.*

One cannot separate suffering it from the actions of the powerful. Therefore an analysis of a deeper historical outlook is needed (Farmer 1996), going deeper than the events my afflicted participants found themselves in. In the case of Steel Valley one can look at the legacy of apartheid and the political and socio-economic structures that were put in place, which have played a role in contributing to the suffering of particular groups and individuals. There is a notable mortality differential between blacks and whites as a result of skewed wealth distribution. This also stems from a broader capitalist project of globalisation.

In order to understand the suffering of some of the characters in the Steel Valley community, I take a look at the life experiences of Rose, George, Sipho and other characters introduced to in this report, who share similar socio-economic conditions. Their experiences are to be embedded in ethnography and the broader social matrix and historical system of the society they inhabit. As Farmer advises, “the texture of dire affliction is perhaps best felt in the gritty details of biography...” (1996: 262). But of more interest for me is the company’s role in its social responsibility bid to alleviate the suffering.

The stories I tell are of people who are driven by the need to escape a life of poverty by coming to Gauteng to seek employment from one of the country’s largest employers (Steelworx). There are structural forces that constrain the residents’ options. From these grim stories there is every suggestion that the structural forces are ones that lead Steelworx’s employees and the residents of the local community to acquire premature illness, and in some cases death. There are the same economic and structural forces that have helped Rose, a

commercial sex worker, contract HIV. AIDS and respiratory diseases are two of the leading diseases amongst adults in the steel valley.

In many instances Steelworx finds itself having run-ins with various pressure groups and activists, particularly from the affected areas of the Vaal region. One of the many reasons is because of their abstraction of the concepts of CSR and their failure to treat them as mandatory duty for corporations instead of a “social good.” CSR is also a capitalist vision which tries to construct social and business “morality”, but we should in no way be deluded about its practices. To unpack where CSR boundaries really lie, we need to understand it within the context in which it operates.

### **Definition of CRS and its Function**

The CSR construct is an ambiguous one. It must be noted that CSR does not have a definition that is universal but has different meanings depending on time and location. It has been established in various studies that CSR has many dimensions which are continuously variable. Archie B. Carroll, a business professor and management expert, identified four pillars as the primary function of CSR – *Money, Law, Ethics* and *Philanthropy*. They are often called Carroll's pyramid and, though contestable, they seemingly address the increasing concern expressed by policy makers about CSR. CSR usually takes the form of corporate philanthropy and organisations engage in the practice either because their business rivals are doing it or they want to portray themselves in a positive light (Carroll 1991).

CSR has been a subject of debate in recent academic and business literature, with its proponents calling it the obligation of business to look after both business and society through its objectives (Bowen 1953). While scholars like Adam Smith look at commutative justice and perfect rights, he also provides a more pragmatic direction for legitimising the stakeholder claim while addressing the components of the economy and morality in line with

stakeholder theories (Brown and Forster 2013). Smith suggests a trade-off between competing stakeholder claims, while some protagonists of CSR may argue about different modalities of how to engage in CSR i.e. considering the cost/benefits of CSR before engagement even if it means violating the rights of stakeholders at minimal levels for the “greater good.” Smith is clear in that no matter how inconsequential the violation of perfect rights is, it should be condemned (Abrams 1951).

Scholarly critiques against CSR argue that CSR is an extension of the neoliberal model, and a ploy to cut costs and make profits while fragmenting activists, cutting competitors on the open markets, and exercising control over various social groups while avoiding government regulations. CSR proponents see it much rather as a win-win situation that supports the pillars of CSR (planet, profit, people). Its contribution to social and political challenges cannot be denied, as well as perpetuating capitalism itself.

Avon, a TNC, recruited women from poor backgrounds to sell cosmetic products door-to-door as partners to their company. The ethnography of Dolan and Johnstone-Louis depicts how transnational firms like Avon penetrate into global markets and still enjoy prevalence while providing bottom of the pyramid (BOP) recipients with lucrative business opportunities (2011). This form of entrepreneurship sought to reinvent the women who benefited from this scheme into believing in the values and virtues of this capitalist enterprise, whilst those who did not have the discipline or the endeavour found this form of corporate responsibility elusive (Dolan and Johnstone-Louis 2011). This is one of the problems for CSR. It creates class strata within the already marginalised, revealing its capitalist nature. No matter how well intended the plans may seem, CSR has financial obligations to maximise profits for shareholders.

Responsibility in corporations is socially constructed and is also malleable, in that it may bend to conform to the political and religious landscape of a society but still maintain business principles. CSR varies according to the local conditions (economic, social and political) and these enable its interplay and shape the character and identity of the corporations. Ferguson (1990) accuses capitalism on a global scale through CSR of trying to do what “developing” states once did, which is to create an imagined developing state which has a disjuncture with reality, hence its failures.

Steelworx formulates its business case for CSR along that of being accountable to its shareholders (*Economic*) and philanthropy (their gifts to scholarly resources). The true nature of a corporation is revealed through its CSR practice. The nature of Steelworx is divulged in its response to issues of environmental pollution and the affliction they cause. No CSR plans were in place for a long period of time until a report by one the pressure groups litigated against the company and in a press report they released they made some of the following allegations after the company defied a court order to show its rehabilitation plans.

*“... it was not just the company that was uncooperative; the local municipality was too...Despite repeated efforts, relevant officials from both Emfuleni Municipality, and officials for the company were unavailable to us...This confirmed the sentiments that were raised by members of the community that local authorities do not care much about the communities that they serve and will not take action against the company because it pays their bills.”* (Bench-Marks Foundation- report 2013)

This chapter depicts one of the many contributions to suffering CSR brings through its commissions and omissions particularly in developing countries and most certainly in the Steel Valley. It also shows the trajectory of oppression from days of colonialism to the present and the different guises it comes in. The shifting power dynamics in politics and yet

economic powers still dictate the terms, resulting in things staying the same for the economically powerless. Despite a change in government nothing has changed for the impoverished. As seen in the Avon example, CSR serves to perpetuate western hegemony. Beneficiaries are selected based on their fitting a capitalist prototype, failing which they are side-lined. In the case of Steel Valley, although Steelworx makes large capital injections in some community projects they often exacerbate the already existing economic inequalities e.g. where they appear to be supporting entrepreneurial activities they actually disenfranchise the economically powerless by leaving them at the mercy of unscrupulous dealers and middle men or leave them to venture in failed projects due to toxic waste on the environment and inaccessibility to quality services and goods. CSR's functions and definitions are paradoxical and it is through these that it has unintended outcomes.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **POLLUTION & SOCIAL SUFFERING**

In this chapter I reveal the extent of the damage Steelworx metes out on the environment and its effects on the inhabitants of the community. Constant court battles with the community and pressure groups reveal the company's unscrupulous side. With a particular focus on George, an old man I spent time with in Steel Valley I draw on his living condition as a particular example of many people of similar background who are afflicted. George's condition of suffering is as a result of operations from the company and the socio-political make-up of his town and structural violence from the national and global matrix. But firstly, I give an insight on the pollution itself and how it occurs.

#### **Pollution on the Environment**

The environment is polluted in three different forms in the making of steel; in gas, solids and liquids. With regard to the gaseous form, the combustion of heavy oil and natural gas are processed in the furnaces, puttingh poisonous emissions such as manganese and mercury into the atmosphere (Sasi 2013). Sulphur-dioxide from other operations also affects the quality of the air. Solid wastes which are also by-products of the steel making process are highly toxic such as hydrofluoric acid and phosphoric acid amongst many others. Over 33 chemicals are known to be produced from solid wastes alone. Water is contaminated through use as a coolant and for removal of other solid material in the production of coke. It is then trapped for disposal, by which time it has numerous chemical toxins. In stormy weather there is a tendency at times for water to be washed away into a community's fresh water supply. Over 100 different chemical toxins are produced by the steel mills.

## **Background of Pollution at Vanderbeijlpark**

National Steel has a history of water contamination dating back to the 1950s (Turton 2004). Ironically the water control pollution Act in South Africa was created just a few years after the Steel works in Vanderbeijlpark opened, as though created specifically for National Steel. The effluent dams built at that time still do not have lining to prevent seepage (Cock and Munnik 2006). In 1961, 16 applicants filed an order to prevent National Steel from polluting the environment. They objected to the pollution of the water through rock seepage which also contaminated the soil and borehole water. The Department of Water Affairs (DWA) then gave a warning to the company. More discoveries of toxins in the 1970s were revealed through research. According to court files the extent to which the operations at National Steel had become extremely hazardous to the environment were revealed. In 1983 Steffen, Robertson & Kirsten (environmental science researchers) made an investigation and discovered that the rock underneath the operations was permeable. Through their investigation they also discovered that the effluent posed a hazard to the ground water and made it unsuitable for domestic consumption and irrigation (Cock and Munnik 2006). Steelworx seems to be either reluctant or unable to carry out remedial plans for the waste disposal. The Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance acting as a watchdog in recent times requested their environmental master plan (a plan revealing how they intended on rehabilitating the environment) but to no avail. This is amongst the many cases that landed them in and out of court with the various lobby groups. Under the Promotion of Access to Information Act, (PAIA 2002), “the request included related progress reports and their updated versions, records of their closure and rehabilitation of its disposal site” (Webber Wentzel 2006).

The effects of the contamination have caused great suffering to many in the community, at least in the instances where people have managed to come forward and report it. There are



possible cases of those who have been afflicted in silence either through lack of knowledge or feeling powerless.

### **“Steel at Any Cost”**

Filled with impassioned members, Bench-Marks Foundation (BMF) is owned by an assemblage of churches in South Africa and an affiliate of international church organisations. It works on the principles of Global Social Responsibility which are bench mark principles used as CSR management tools. Bench-mark principles are amongst the many instruments used in business to assess a company’s social responsible. BMF sets out fundamental principles in corporate social responsibilities that are expected of business. They use what they regard as bench mark principles to measure and guide the performance of business and continually review a company’s progress and recommend further action.

BMF has been pivotal in acting as a watch-dog on Steelworx’s performance in social responsibility. Their reports have given insight on how Steelworx has slacked in carrying out their duty in redressing the areas where they have caused harm. Amongst the many reports they compiled was one damning report titled “*Steel at Any Cost*” which reveals the dissatisfaction of injured workers with the compensation and the level of toxic waste dumped on the environment from by-products of the steel making process. The report also raised contentious issues regarding their geographic responsibility. In an implicit manner they asserted that the company took responsibility for undesirable impacts within their premises, therefore disregarding the damage they were doing in the communities. One of their recommendations was that government take a leading role in ensuring the company’s rehabilitation and compensation of afflicted workers and areas.

Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA), a justice alliance group formally launched in 2006, are engaged in lobbying, advocacy and research work on the dangers of the toxins



emitted by the steel giant, and have been taking Steelworx to court since 2012. They seek environmental justice for the Vaal community with primary task teams which focus mainly on Steelworx, Samancor, Petrochemical industry (Sasol Chemical Industry) and pollution by the local government. The significance of VEJA in my report is that it is a lobby group which not only seeks to bring the harmful nature of the activities by Steelworx to the fore, but also, through its research work, questions the power inherent in Steelworx and how it negates social responsibility. It does this in a hope for developing a knowledge base that can be used tactically in the future.

A member of VEJA, Victor Munnik narrates the story of Strike Matsepo, then 84 years old. He bought a house near the then NS slag heap and then suffered great losses in livestock from the contamination over the years. Of interest is the denialist attitude NS has over the incident, what Munnik (2016) terms the “politics of knowledge” at play emanating from the power structures that allow for pollution. The politics of knowledge is a tactical process for preserving the status quo. The company asks a range of questions when litigated: Does pollution happen? Can you prove it? Can you prove it is us?

*“Matsepo presently suffers from blood in his urine, tiredness and lack of concentration. He spent 6 weeks in hospital with kidney failure. His sister Alinah came to live with him but she died in July 2004 of kidney failure and cancer. Strike comments with some bitterness: “My sister would be alive now without NS.....Now they supply us with piped water, but it’s too late for her”. Other family members are also sick, and report that they stay inside the house because the dust and air pollution is so bad. Recently having suffered a stroke, and then facing the threat of the sheriff of the court impounding all his possessions to pay legal costs from a failed court challenge, he states: “My body is full of pain”, but he is prepared to die fighting NS*

*“I am trapped here,” says Strike. “I can’t move and buy a new place with the little money they are offering me for this plot” (Munnik 2016).*

The environmental impact of the waste prejudices the community with regard to basic services providing clean water and air, exacerbating the poverty in the community. The report shows how those with economic power take for granted and exploit through their structures of inequality those who lack the same power (Stoddart 2007). It also captures the notion of Pierre Bourdieu’s welfare subject, whose subjective experience lies at the heart of the social damage inflicted by capitalist societies on the least powerful and the intrapsychic and relations that result (Frost and Hogget 2008). Both the internal (intra-psychic) and external (social) worlds bear wounds as a result of social structural oppression. What the report above suggests is Bourdieu’s concept of social suffering, where the subject is oppressed not only materially but also in the form of feelings (anger, humiliation, despair, resentment) as a result of racial, class or poverty experiences (Frost and Hogget 2008). I was to encounter similar stories as I interacted with the members of the Vaal community.

### **Effects of Pollution on Health**

The Steelworx plant has been in existence for over 70 years and a lot of toxic pollution has been happening since its inception (Munnik 2016). Rehabilitation of the environment and the people will probably take another 70 years if not a century (Cock and Munnik 2006). Firstly the diseases or illnesses from the toxins are contestable and are also silent killers, making it difficult to identify them immediately and to attribute them to specific operations. There is no telling the extent of the health effects of the current operations right now even though regular health check-ups are now exercised by the company on staff.

According to a newspaper article by Fiona McCloud and Yolandi Groenewald, in the Mail and Guardian on June 14, 2005, *“In Steel Valley, residents say cats are born without heads, a*

*piglet had sexual organs growing out of its anus, and a cow born hermaphrodite had to be put down. Vegetables grow in strange shapes and even the rats are ill. ”*

A study by Cock and Munnik on 500 informants in Steel Valley reported how a lack of energy and strength had led to unemployment and negatively affected their lives (2006). The pollution has also led to social and cultural disruption of people’s lives. Growing organic foods is least expensive and leads to both an economic and subsistence base, and yet the pollution has created the inability to be a good provider for the family, a valued trait for African communities. People cannot walk long distances and have thus become socially isolated in the greater Steel Valley due to lack of public transportation in the dispersed area.

Medical records from studies revealed shocking statistics on the level of harm on human health by the steel pollutants. In a 2001 court case it was shown how kidney diseases and various types of cancers were caused. DNA of people tested showed results to be higher than the national and international level. From the number of participants in that research the commonalities of the ones found afflicted was exposure to cadmium pollution and the fact that they all resided in Steel Valley (Munnik 2002).

### **The story of George**

Much of our culture is revealed in the way we respond to cases of illness and death. Illness can be a social experience, depending on the afflicted’s location and local condition, and our comprehension of the body and what makes it susceptible to illness and the social construction thereof. The attention sick people receive and how illness reshapes relationships, language, communities as well as one’s experience, are all determined by local social conditions (Ross 2010). Nothing could be closer to the truth as I witnessed one particular gentleman “Oldman” George. He bore a resemblance to one of my favourite uncles, with an exuberant personality and loved telling stories when given the opportunity.

When I first met George I was in my fourth day of field work in Sebokeng. A vibrant gentleman in his late fifties, and retired from the Steelworx steel plant, he kept a small afro and beard with a hint of grey hair. I had gone to his house for an interview after a referral from a friend. I managed to inform him about my research a day before we met. He was dressed in a blue work suit, probably from the days when he was still employed at the steel plant. We sat outside on his veranda and began chatting. He told me about his history as a worker at National Steel plant (NS) during the apartheid regime, now known as Steelworx.

*George: We couldn't afford to buy things back then, and things are getting worse now. Life was simpler then, our bosses used to take care of us. I remember my first boss would buy groceries for me and my father for Christmas.*

*Me: How were the working conditions in terms of safety?*

*George: Uyazi (you know)..., this job can be dangerous sometimes, but we were also tough in our days, unlike the young men we have now. (An argument I have heard too often from people in George's generation).*

This indicates the generation gap between George and the current generation of workers, the difference of opinions regarding beliefs, politics, or values between his generation and a majority of those who toil at the plant currently. This could be as a result of their generational experiences. In George's time, no doubt the working conditions could have been much tougher without the improved technology the current workers now enjoy. A retrospective cohort study shows that in a cohort "Value differences between parents and adult offspring could be attributed to their different life stage or historical experience and socialization" (Elder 1975:171), although he also argues that there are more assumptions and assertions to this than empirical evidence.

George was a second generation employee at the Steelworx plant, his father having worked there from 1964 to 1969 before taking a retirement package in the late 1970s. His father began working during the second development phase of National Steel at Vanderbijlpark. Like his father, leaving work was an involuntary exercise, due to poor health. George looked after one of his siblings and his own children as well when his father passed away. On a meagre pay he managed to support a household of seven people comprised of his wife two daughters, three sons and his younger sibling no older than his first born child. George was diagnosed in 2015 with Pneumoconiosis, an occupational respiratory disease caused by fibrogenic mineral dust. Having worked in the steel plant for over thirty years, his infection accumulated over a period of time and started manifesting in the latter years of his work. George suffered occasional coughs, and at one stage he was almost left paralysed, and was bedridden for over a week. Because of that he rarely moved out of his yard much. During all my time with him I never got to experience any of his severe attacks, but could see some frailness and gauntness in his body, from the way he navigated his way around the house at a very slow pace. As a way of compensation, George's children were taken in as permanent staff and worked in the same department as their father.

George's children lived with him in the same household, the same housing George and his father lived in since his arrival from the Eastern Cape in 1964 in search of a job in Gauteng. Their house was a six roomed structure with some visible extensions to it, indicating some renovations had been done to the original plan of the house. Located in the middle of Sebokeng Unit 7, the house was just a typical house in the neighbourhood. In a clustered settlement with generally small yards the houses tend to vary in size, with household income being one of the indicating factors. Meaning those with more cash are able to renovate and extend their homes. The original structures were four roomed houses and several have

expanded in size compared to others, to the extent of having lavish renovations and giving their habitats suburban looks.

As we sat outside the veranda staring at the dust road outside the yard, George and I chatted away. During our conversation he pointed to me the houses of some of the neighbours he first arrived with, in Sebokeng. George told me some sobering stories about the neighbourhood and how people resisted paying rentals in the 1980s and had clashes with the law back then.

Memories of his home had turned to be a place of pain and anguish as George was kept grounded at home most of the time by his ailing condition. His young brother spent most of the time at home nursing him as he was unemployed. His brother was a very energetic young man who did most of the household chores, from cooking and cleaning and did most of George's laundry.

George had also been unemployed for the past two years and was living on a pension fund and supplement from his two sons. His family showed him a lot of compassion and care and he seemed to liven up whenever they were there and one would assume he was ordinary and as healthy as any other person in the house. They inquired daily on his condition and what he ate during the day when they were away at work. This showed the moral endeavour of care giving and how vital it was as a matter of well-being and survival for a patient.

On some days the old man spent his time either in the corrugated shack that served as a *spaza* or tuck-shop - no larger than a guard house, about three metres in height, always dark inside and reliant on natural lighting from the two windows that it had which were always sealed. Or on a much cooler day he preferred sitting on his veranda and selling his supply of lollipops, biscuits and snacks, which were favourable to children that passed by. His measly income was always supplemented by his children.

When he had found the need to “exercise” his feet as he would call it, I accompanied him to the local hospital (Sebokeng Hospital) where he got his regular supply of medication for his chronic ailment. With no means of transportation to the hospital apart from the public taxis, George preferred to walk as he found the taxis sometimes a bit too cramped for his condition. There was a relatively new wellness clinic with state of the art equipment which was set up within the hospital as a CSR initiative. When we arrived at the clinic in the morning the centre had already assumed a long winding queue. People stood outside in the queue waiting for medical attention, some had visible symptoms of their illnesses seeking medical attention, from coughing and others who failed to endure the long wait in the queue could be seen lying down on the lawn that surrounded the clinic. People who stood in line complained about the long queues and claimed to have re-iterated this from the day of its opening. This was an indication of how overburdened the health system was barely in its initial stages. This also showed the apathetic side of public care, and the difference in empathy of the attention given in a home situation. Hospitals dealt with statistics – the assembly line approach, every patient was another number. Despite the resources CSR renders to the facility, it lacked the human element, an important factor in the healing process.

This chapter reveals how environmental pollution occurs and its effects as a manifestation of structural violence. The dusty roads and yards, and poor quality of water always challenged the health support many afflicted patients receive. On one day when George had a severe attack, in an attempt to get fresh air outside the house he apparently inhaled a lot of dust. George’s children took turns and paying for the general well-being of their father. There is no disputing that there was good social cohesion and collective efficacy from the household. *“Esintwini umuntu om’dala akalahlwa,”* his brother said that one day to me (Translated: in our culture you don’t abandon an old person). Suffering is experienced not only in the form of illness but in the form of anxiety in many families. Illness is only but one occasion for



suffering (Frank 2001). The constant running battles in and outside court between the company and the community pressure groups is an indication that the community is fighting a large force, a force whose operations are embedded on a particular ideology, one that cannot be disengaged overnight. This could also be an explanation why CSR fails to feature where it seems most relevant. The ramification of CSR in not finding its appropriate role such as this one is that another generation is trapped back into the perils of harm production, and again retained in the cycle of poverty, socially reproduced. Inequality is continually reproduced as the whole system is overlain within the capitalist ideology.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE COMMUNITY AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

In some days to come I was to be exposed to another life in the community, a life of social capital in a different form, different from that of George and his family, where enterprising youths used each other as support structures to deal with much larger structural forces in a dialectic between the economy and intimacy. Driven by the lack of opportunities, unemployed female youth end up in unfavourable unions to escape poverty. Intimacy, a personal part of life, has been reconceptualised into a commercial entity to deal with hard times (Hunter 2010). The effects of the legacy practices are deep and keep manifesting. Despite efforts to embark on community development programs, gutting repercussions come to the fore, setting back efforts for social upliftment in the community. Before looking at the CSR projects and other strategies the community embarks on, in a few paragraphs below I would like to give a synopsis of the social and economic condition the community is in.

Unemployment is apparent in the Steel Valley. The community is characterised by lack of resources in terms of income and overstretched housing and health facilities. There are those that lack the skills, credentials, and connections required in the current society. The connections which are essential in the upward mobility of one's life, in the form of friends or family, work as a form of social capital in securing a better livelihood.

According to a study done on the Vaal by Theron, an expert on livelihoods and a professor at the Vaal University of Technology (VUT), "the impact of extra income on the poverty levels of these 286 households was then determined. The results of the survey also showed that the unemployment level was 91% and that the mean monthly income was R612.50" (2010: 1). "Other indications of the study were that the community was a poverty stricken community

suffering from chronic food insecurity” (Oldewage-Theron 2010: 1). If ever poverty was considered an abstract concept, the visuals in the Vaal triangle workers’ communities made it real and concrete. From the shacks built in the backyards as spare rooms for leasing out, and tuckshops in corrugated structures, to touting for passengers in the busy taxi rank, whichever way to look for means of an income people were doing it all. Some building structures looked dilapidated and inhabitable, others with window glass replaced with cardboard boxes to ward off any breeze or unwelcome insects I would presume. The sight of spaza shops and back rooms is a common feature in every household, those without them look somewhat strange, and in most cases these are the neater looking yards and houses, so there is also an assumption that those are the better income households.

A majority of the inhabitants at the Vaal are dependent on Steelworx as an employer but there has been a huge influx of rural folk coming to this peri-urban area to seek employment and greener pastures in an economy that is suffering. The unemployment levels keeps rising and the need for accommodation rises in proportion to the migrants. Most of the land is not designed or suitable for habitation, or growing crops, but the enterprising residents of the Vaal are quick to supply an alternative to this problem. The alternatives for most come in the form of accommodation for the rising number of people that migrate to the area. From a report I got later at the plant from one of the management officials during an interview, I learnt that jobs were scarce around the Vaal triangle and the plant had planned on retrenching earlier in the year of 2015 due to sustainability issues, exacerbating the problem of unemployment.

Issues of sustainability now go beyond environmental care and also involve social inclusion. In fact the redefinition of the term “social exclusion” became prominent in the 1980s as it began to encompass more social groups giving it its more diverse meaning (Silver 1994). Subjective exclusion became a term in social theory which was abstracted from a political

expression and was used to describe a state in which any individual or group could be treated as an object. As stated by the French government in the 1980s the significance of naming a social problem has symbolic political implications in order to find solutions to deal with it. It is through the problems of “family, households, social isolation, and the decline of class solidarity based on unions, the labour market, and the working-class neighbourhood and social networks” that the term was coined (Silver 1994: 533).

The extent of poverty affects those in gainful employment as well. This is also due to the effects of harm production on the environment. Food stuffs all have to be bought depleting the already low income in most households due to land pollution. Lower productivity affects health and nutrition, reducing the physical labour capacity of the poor.

In this chapter I demonstrate the different ways Steelworx and particular individuals have tried to alleviate their indigent circumstances in the community. The focus on these individuals is particularly because of their job area. These are people who plied their trade on the shop-floor, blue collar workers, who are exposed to the harsh conditions of the plant.

### **Sipho’s story**

I had spent some days in the townships already scouting around before going to the town of Vanderbeijlpark. From the main office in the plant to moving around the industrial area and just observing the town, this exercise led me to speak to several respondents who lived in the nearby residences. In a casual sort of manner my conversations with them had managed to elicit information on their health and living conditions.

I spent most of the day seated outside the municipal library lawns as a central location to observe the town’s activities while I waited for Thandi to call. “Thandi” was my contact person in CSR who had promised to take me on her community rounds. Thandi never showed up although I managed to meet up with her a few days later on a visit to one of my

informants. While I waited for her at that time I took an opportunity to familiarise myself with the surroundings.

A noticeable sea of blue work-suits could be seen as a gang of men came from the northern end of town. Streaming towards the taxi rank, it was the pattern at that period of day and meant the day shift was over for most industrial workers. It was some time after 6pm and the sun was setting. These were men coming from the industrial sites where Steelworx and other industrial services were located. Most Steelworx workers were easy to identify as they had work-suits with company labels on them.

Having observed these working men for a couple of days before, I decided to intercept that beeline to the taxi rank. I approached a man walking alone with a limp although he seemed rather tired. “*Eita*” as I made my greeting (this is a casual interactive way of greeting, particularly common in the townships). “*Ola*” he replied and giving me a scrutinising look. Having worked in a similar industry before I knew how precious home-time was after a long grind in the blue collar. I had to give him that acknowledgement first. “*Bezibuya emsebenzini van dag?*” (Translated: it must have been tough at work today?). I tagged along as we began talking. It was a Tuesday late afternoon, a little after 5pm and Siphos as I shall call him seemed to be in a hurry to get home. He told me his in-laws were staying with him at home and during the week he wanted to make sure he got home early. He had been away from home the whole weekend. I had presumed it was for work purposes but “*No*”, he said. He had been hanging around with his friends from work on Friday after knocking off and in a drunken stupor spent a couple of nights away from home. I escorted him all the way to his home as I had lots of time to spare. We walked an additional 4 kilometres from where I had met him, past the taxi rank and the municipal Medi-clinic south of the CBD and towards a suburban neighbourhood before finally reaching his home. We stood outside his gate for about half an hour as he related to me what he does. I could not help but notice this middle

class suburban house he was about to enter. In a very serene neighbourhood with two big cars parked outside an open garage. Curious how he afforded all that, he told me how it all happened.

Sipho's story is one of a man who used to work at the plant and contracted Tuberculosis (TB), his case so severe he had to leave work. Sipho was compensated under the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Disease Act of 1993 (COIDA) (revised in 1997), under the provision for "no fault" compensation, effectively meaning he could not hold his employer at fault for his sickness. Together with his pension fund Sipho bought a house in the suburban area of Vanderbeijlpark and was hoping to start a poultry and vegetable project in a rented plot in the outskirts of town. Unfortunately the poultry project never took off because of fears of polluted water and soil in the plot he was going to be operating from. Although he had already started growing his crops they never got to see their way to the market either. The cabbages and tomatoes he grew withered, with the exception of a very few. By the time all this happened he had lost a considerable amount of money. Sipho then negotiated his way back to work on a part time basis, doing light work in a non-hazardous environment. So it was not surprising that one would see him toiling his way to and from work once in a while. *"Angiselamali manje, (I don't have money now)...my cars are parked I'm even thinking of selling one of them."* The economic situation for Sipho had deteriorated so badly he felt powerless. There was nowhere else he felt he could turn to. The company had failed him once again.

On one occasion Sipho and one of his neighbours at the plot he operated from were lobbied by a group of residents to engage in a protest strike against the steel giant. The protests were meant to be on the environmental impact the steel production was having as well as general dissatisfaction with the company. Due to poor planning and lack of experience their efforts never really amounted to anything. Their courage and tenacity was short-lived due to other

social forces that were at play – financial resources, distance, race and class differences as well as ideology. This was also a reminder of the power the company possessed.

When I asked Thandi what the plans were to rehabilitate the environment to help those that found themselves with no income. She assured me that plans had been there since 2011, and that the company was spending billions in Rands to “make things right.”

*“You have to understand that these are legacy issues” as she called them, “we have been on a trail to correct things which were done in the past, it’s difficult to deal with individual issues,” she said.*

About two years ago Steelworx incorporated the North West University in their CSR plans for community development. Their task was to help the company sustainable development plans for entrepreneurial training. This plan was to make the community members and employees less dependent on the company. However it is difficult to make people who have been conditioned to make money from seeking employment from the company to turn their lives around through self-sustenance, especially with people who do not receive funding from organisations that actually encourage the projects. Hence, many people supplemented their income with spaza shops and leasing out back rooms for accommodation.

What Thandi basically argued was that they were trying to end the old patronage approach to the community challenges and build a sustainable development model. Many people found themselves turning to the company when they were in poor circumstances, which somewhat created a dependency syndrome. An entrepreneurial development course was run in the community it targeted mostly former and current employees of Steelworx. Its purpose was to train members of the community to be entrepreneurs as a sustainable development program.

Thandi explained that, as much as they as a company impart knowledge and entrepreneurial training to create a citizen to think outside the box, they always dissuaded people from venturing into growing crops and keeping livestock. Farming projects had proven dismal in the past due to high levels of pollution, so new methods of self-sustenance were used. The company seemed to be offering far less for the project than it used to, almost as though to say they were neglecting it. Extractive industries tend to have a limited lifespan, and because of that she said it was the company's policy to train people with skills to seek economic opportunities outside the company. It was one of Thandi's fears which she often spoke about, the fear that the project might end but more so as an antecedent to her department's closure. I could never imagine Steelworx's CSR department closing down in the midst of the toxic contamination mess the company was in but then as insider she probably she knew better. If there is something I also learnt, it was that relying on corporations made the socially excluded even more at risk in the case of economic difficulties, should they close or migrate as big corporations sometimes do, it would reduce their socio-economic status and further entrench their suffering.

The company has a clear policy on funding: it does not give money to businesses. Amongst other people who do not receive funding are companies outside the geographical region, "individuals, private organisations, families or trusts, labour unions, funding for operations or capital funding for any purpose loans, investments or grants to cover operating deficits" etc. (Steelworx 2016). The company however runs its own projects for communities to benefit.

### **Learning Projects**

Through observation and sources from the company, a lot of money is spent by the Steelworx on science projects for schoolgoing children. These projects are social investments whose value is commercial. A considerable amount of money and time seem to be allocated to



teaching and bursary programs. Schools in the surrounding communities are part of the programs. Steelworx's dedication to education, particularly in the subjects of science, mathematics and engineering, is unquestionable. The science projects seem to serve more as a status symbol for the company and community more than anything else. Considering the industry their business is in, naturally it would seem they are building a human resource base for themselves. Although it cannot be denied that the science projects have some level of benefit for the school going kids as it exposes them to new technologies and possibilities. Such investments do not have immediate social impact but tend to benefit the company more as a form of social investment.

In one of my rendezvous in the town of Vanderbeijlpark I had managed to speak to a few schoolgoing children who had hopes of employment, particularly at Steelworx. The only response I got as to why they would want to work at Steelworx was "*inational steel inemali*" (translated: National Steel has lots of money).

De Miranda in Raven (2013), a study on technology being supplied to rural Nepal, found no evidence pointing to the fact that this would close the socio-economic gap. If anything, "critics found this as a utopian construct with no relationship with the real world of starvation and poverty nevertheless learning" (2009). Apart from the toxins that were created in the labs and dumped in the environment by these new technology labs, there is a combination of factors embedded in a complex web of language, content literacy, community and institutional structures that need to be considered for a meaningful CSR structure.

CSR often fails at times to establish itself in its locale, dismissing local needs and priorities which begs the question whether CSR is simply a smokescreen or is concerned with meeting society's expectations?



Johnston (2016) differentiates between corporate philanthropy and social responsibility, but he also finds them in harmony in certain aspects. He also asserts they are both engageable but one should assess the level of commitment financially before practising them. Corporate Watch also argue that the benefits to society are always doubtful in both operations of CSR and Philanthropy: “CSR has ulterior motives” (2016: 1). Corporations tend to donate large sums of money to charity, and it can be assumed that the money also belongs to shareholders, so surely they should be much more benefits than costs: “This may be because they want to improve their image by associating themselves with a cause, to exploit a cheap vehicle for advertising, or to counter the claims of pressure” (Corporate Watch 2016: 78). “What passes today as CSR, or calls itself as such, is no such thing. Rather it is really just corporate philanthropy, which has no real, deep or lasting impact on the societies it purports to be helping” (African Brains 2012).

As Welker (2014) also suggests, some actions of the corporation are not solely attributed to profit maximisation. She attributes this to two models, the patronage and the sustainable development models, which however still fit into the profit–maximisation model. She equates Newmont, the mining corporation in her study, to a pot of money disbursing provisional funds for infrastructural development under the patronage model (Welker 2014: 69). Under the sustainable development model, Newmont is likened to a spaceship which leaves the locals supposedly having gained the capacity to provide for themselves by incubating capitalism. Implicitly capitalism is still regarded as the route to sustainability.

Steelworx embarked on the construction of the Good-Health wellness centre, a refurbished segment of the local hospital which cost the company in the region of R13 million, according to Steelworx sources. A relatively new wellness centre, built as a CSR initiative by Steelworx in collaboration with the Gauteng Department of Health within the hospital, it caters for different kinds of ailments within the community, from psychological counselling,

to HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis, and other communicable diseases. From what I had learnt from Steelworx this project was the first of its kind. The project serves to supplement government efforts to provide quality health service in a country with a large population growth. The centre provided health service to the company's employees as well as the community at large.

Most of Steelworx's CSR so far appeared to be in the form of voluntary programs in the community. If so as the studies reveal there is no direct impact on environmental benefit and the economically vulnerable are still at a risk of health impairment. This subsequently means no change in the downward economic mobility of the community. Therefore contributions to physical infrastructure alone are not a sufficient element for social responsibility, no matter how well managed. These are projects with little sustainability and do little to change the impoverishment in the community. Some ethical violations are not immediately obvious, hence donations made to the community and other means of giving resources to the poor community leave lasting impressions. For the young children I had met, still impressionable, the branding of the company in that manner had left an imprint in their minds as a big and rich company, something that cannot perhaps be disputed. This does not in any way translate to being a good corporate citizen.

Researchers from Harvard Kennedy School, Borck, Coglianese, and Nash (2006), discovered that the fact that a firm embarks on a voluntary government program is proof that there are costly measures for the firm to benefit society. They went on to say that companies with large discharge of toxins or those with non-compliance in the production industries or extractive industries were likely to embark on CSR – something which was already apparent at Steelworx. A great influence for firms to do so was found to be either their research and development expenditures, being a member of a particular association, or the culture of the organisation itself. However, through the studies there is no general agreement found on the

firm to have any environmental benefit beyond the resources they put in to implement the activities.

Secondly, “as a voluntary industry initiative there is evidence which indicates that firms take advantage of positive publicity, although the actual environmental benefits are not evident” (<http://environment.harvard.edu>).

Thirdly, “In general, industry-sponsored programs exhibit the same kinds of participation patterns as government-administered voluntary programs. That is, larger firms, more prominent firms, and firms with poorer environmental records are more likely to participate. Again, there is no systematic evidence of positive environmental impacts net of social costs.” (Reinhardt, Stavins, and Vietor 2008: 21).

### **Capitalising On the Social**

One Wednesday afternoon I had made an appointment with Sipho to go to the plot where he planned to reap the remainder of his failed crops. I waited for Sipho at the original spot where we had met for the first time. Disappointed that he did not show up, I chatted to another group of workers making their way towards the taxi rank, quite determined to make use of every minute I spent in this town.

There were four highly conversant young men, whom I later regarded as the fabulous four. Their average age could have been the late twenties. I introduced myself and told them where I was from, and I was immediately bombarded with a barrage of questions and playful jokes. “*So you guys are going to speak to our manager? We need you to come with your friends and we close down the company.*” This of course came from their knowledge that I was studying at the University of the Witwatersrand and the events of the student protests that had taken place in 2015. “*Are you guys going to protest again this year? Kanti kahle khhle nifunani?*”

(What exactly do you [students] want?). Careful not to allow my focus get diverted, for a while I thought these workers could have seen a moment of reprieve from their torment at work, but realised these were nothing more than a few banters from people who could have had a stressful day's work just wanting to find a lighter moment, I chuckled at a few jokes as they came along, although it is one topic I could have also easily engaged in until midnight.

Keith, Kenny, Kevin and Kundai as I called them seemed to be in high spirits and I found them easy to engage with from there on. They spoke in Xhosa and Zulu most of the time, but of greater significance for me was that the fabulous four had a great command of the English language. This was of significance because where I tended to have difficulty in articulating myself in isiXhosa I spoke in English and they understood me very well, bearing in mind that in South Africa, generally, English is a second or third language. For most black South Africans conversation in English is not a common practice, especially in the townships. *"We work in the fire of hell, as they seemed to call their place. The furnaces are "hell fire,"* one man seemed to be saying. Left in a state of ambivalence by the statement that was made, I sensed some boastfulness in the way he said it and yet an air of resentment for being there.

As we walked with all the jesting that was going on we stopped at a bottle store. Two of the men out of the four advanced inside to buy some liquor. All the way to the bottle store, which was about an hour's walk, I had tried engaging the men about their work and they seemed always evasive. One of the men asked me while we stood outside waiting for his friends. *"What is your research going to change? A lot of people come here all the time asking us questions nothing has ever changed. I feel you guys come here and get information to make money from us and we never see you again."* In a way I understood his concern. It is not an uncommon practice to meet people in the field that feel exploited or have encountered some form of exploitation. I could not make any assurances or promises that their immediate problems they had would be solved but I only told them their information was valuable

nonetheless for future use. Careful not to fall into the same trap as Sipho of sharing information with great optimism of change, I allowed my response to sink into their thoughts while they drank.

It was not long before the stories from the company started slowly emerging. “*Remember uFingers?*” said one of the Keith, “*Yes, I wonder what happened to him,*” Responded another. *Inkingango Fingers ubekalala emsebenzini* (translated: the problem with Fingers is he used to sleep on the job). Apparently “Fingers” was a nickname given to one of their work colleagues, who lost two of his fingers on the grinder in the workshop. “*I was working with the grinders those days when it happened. Yoh! The guy screamed even the managers came running from outside, and it was towards lunch break, I remember that day. Yi Chain yakhe im'khawadile*” (it’s his chain that got him injured).

From the discussion, Fingers used to wear a gold chain around his neck and it got caught on the grinder; while trying to save it somehow his fingers got in the way of the grinding blades. Apparently it was against constant safety warning and advice from management and some of his work colleagues. “*That guy never listened anyway,*” said Keith. Telling the story seemed to be a funny moment as they all chuckled and laughed about how silly he was. Upon being taken to the hospital, Fingers returned to work only to work for a few months. The word around the workers is that he got compensated a large sum of money and therefore decided to leave. As it should be, matters about workers’ pay and compensation are quite confidential around the plant, hence speculation is always rife about who got what. “*Nami ngiyafisa kwamanye amalanga nje ngisike umunwe ngivele ngithole isaka ngihambe*” (some days I wish I could also just cut my finger off and get lots of money and leave), said Kevin.

That statement no doubt was a sign of frustration against his perceived impecunious circumstance. Could the pain caused by suffering from a mutilated finger compare to the

assemblage of problems that social forces inflict? Which one is better or worse? Why would one even compare the two? Or was it just an expression of frustration over the structural forces, or rather a way to indicate through something less abstract the level of pain he suffers structurally? Whichever way I got the idea of what he was communicating to us was that his life was not a bed of roses.

I learnt that from the fabulous four. Two were brothers and the others just good friends. These were people who identified with each other's backgrounds. Coming from somewhat a middle-class upbringing in the Eastern Cape, the two brothers lost their parents and had to fend for themselves as means of survival. Brought by their uncle to the Vaal (who worked in management), they landed a job at the steel company. The other two friends were from KwaZulu-Natal and were from a privileged background too until one of the four's parents lost their jobs and found themselves in Gauteng looking for employment with virtually no relatives or anyone they knew they found themselves at Steelworx as well. The fourth participant was not willing to share his story of how he landed himself at the steel plant, neither were his friends willing to tell his story. However, they had a common theme of constantly reminiscing about their lives back home and how they all wished to go back. They reiterated that they were not chased from their homes but it is their personal socio-economic circumstances that brought them together in the Vaal.

In next two days I would meet the fabulous four after work as they assured me that it was their daily routine to walk from the plant to the bottle store. And indeed without fail, they kept a timely routine. By Friday there were more comfortable with my presence and voluntary information came. The much quieter one of the four who seemed somewhat older and had not given me his background story previously as well, astonishingly gave me an account of how he was now suffering from arthritis from the water contaminated by the



toxins. Lack of formal knowledge and safety education on how to handle the contaminated water was the reason they gave. Kundai commented,

*“We were not trained properly and we also don’t have access to proper health care. You have to be in management for you to be taken care of nicely.”*

He related how he went to see the doctor for medication, but his condition did not improve. Kevin commented how he was sent to the company clinic which is inside the plant but nothing wrong was found and resorted to going to the community hospital.

On Friday I learned that all four men lived together. The bottle store in which we congregated for the past three days or so was a double storey structure in which they occupied the space upstairs. Downstairs adjacent to the bottle store was a general goods shop which sold small artefacts, from stationary to a bit of clothing, blankets, pots and pans. This shop was jointly owned by the four men. Inside was a young lady who sold on their behalf when they were away at work. The idea of the trading store was started by Kenny the much quieter one of the lot. It was an investment on his medical expenses and he brought in his three friends who seemed to be of the same entrepreneurial mind to invest in more stock. His medical bills were unbearably high, he said, and it made him cut back on some of his necessities.

*“Now we even have a burial society amongst ourselves even if Steelworx doesn’t pay for any of our funerals, we’re covered...Plus there is money which we hope will get us out of here sometime soon...I’m not going to drive a BMW from this money but I definitely won’t go hungry,”* said Kevin at some stage while we chatted.

*Why this sort of business though?* I asked curiously. *“When Kenny first started we advised him to get a place like this which is nice and small and we can always expand from this”* responded Keith.

*“Besides our parents used to own a supermarket back home before it was taken over by the bank...we have an idea of how to run this,”* said Keith again casually pointing in the direction of the shop.

For both individuals and communities, rich and poor alike, dealing with extenuating circumstances such as job loss, poor health or death, social cohesion is important for livelihood and capital advancement. Social capital goes beyond explaining the response strategies since the beginning of man and survival. It is more than getting by but also knowing how to get ahead. The same principles are used in business as are used in individual settings. Success depends on finding partnerships which are mutually beneficial and colluding with different agents and agencies with different expert contributions. Using interpersonal relationships and social networks the four men found their individual goals much more achievable collectively. They seemed to be reaping the beneficial side of their collective action. It is the exposure to the fragility of their lives that led them to transform their diminished state of financial and material welfare, in the absence of company structures that were expected to fill that void. Through a project that they kept close to their chests they were on a path to raise capital to redeem the life they once knew.

## **Sex and Poverty**

An issue which is hard to ignore is how the scourges of occupational and communicable diseases have taken their toll as a result of the social conditions created by the prevailing political economy in the Vaal triangle. These diseases have become an important determinant of health as much as the workplace conditions. The search for better livelihood amongst women who frequent these spaces meets the perceived job stress and search for extramural activities which workers engage in. The toxic tavern lifestyle with commercial sex workers and binge drinking arise as hazardous as the work conditions they operate in. Rising



unemployment and socio-economic conditions in the current capital-led globalisation has made life for many precarious, especially women. The long history of circular migration by men to mining towns has been a dominant explanation in the spread of HIV in South Africa, however a contemporary trend it is now the mobility of women are connecting to the economy through means of social production. According to Hunter (2010) longstanding themes in this social production are domestic and sexual labours which have been used to subsidise capitalist production. Hunter 2010 also says from his studies the highest rates of HIV are found in some of the poorest areas of the country where there are lots of informal settlement dwellings. In this segment I take you to one such place.

After spending several days with George, he referred me to one of his nephews who also worked at the plant. A tall and light-complexioned gentleman in his late thirties, he easily reached six feet in height. Themba as I shall call him lived in Unit 17, a different section of the township just further south and more towards the steel plant location. Themba came highly recommended by his uncle and could possibly link me to more participants.

It was Friday afternoon 3 pm and Themba had knocked off early from work. He worked for a contracting company at the plant and his working hours were dependent on the amount of work for the day. He came to his uncle's house to fetch me in a beaten up old truck, red in colour, playing loud music. He was accompanied by a friend (Jack) who was similar in stature. It was not long after they had arrived that we left together they seemed to be in a hyped mood. Themba and Jack shared a house in this township, Jack was new in town, he was on a 2 year contract and was now in his third month in the Vaal triangle. It was not long after dark that Themba told me we would meet some of his work colleagues that night, but we had to drive down all the way to Orange Farm. Orange Farm is where we were doing "*amaFriday*" in simple translation it means Orange Farm is where we would be doing

(partying) on Friday night. *AmaFriday* as they are affectionately known has become a metaphoric term for partying on Fridays, as the term is commonly used in the townships.

I could not pass up the opportunity to interact with more employees from the steel plant, even though I was a bit tired. I had spent the early hours of the day with George going to purchase stock for his tuck shop. But a real opportunity had arisen to meet more participants so as to get a snippet of the discourse around the Steelworx working environment. In approximately half an hour we had reached Orange Farm and were looking for our intended destination, which was not difficult to find as it seemed all roads in Orange Farm led there. We arrived to a typical township tavern, where alcohol was sold at a competitive price on the market. This is partly the reason why it attracted so many people, and the owner of the tavern was also a well-known personality and retiree from one of the firms around the Vaal triangle. What drove these men every week to seek this leisure? What I learnt from Themba was that every Friday they always found a random place within the township where they could drink alcohol. He liked to refer to it as “destressing.” I was not particularly sure that was the ideal way to deal with it but then again my place was not to judge or advise, I was just simply an ethnographer.

A study by Roberts (2013) could explain the activity of these two males who expressed discontent with their job on several occasions. In the same study the investigators also paid particular attention to how certain occupations induced characteristic states of mind. Leisure time was created by the modern organisation of paid work, so it is argued that particular kinds of employment that individuals practised shaped their particular orientations towards and uses of leisure. One example was individuals using their free time towards something they could not find at work. Another explanation could be that, in the South African context this behavioural pattern on leisure dates back from the country’s socio-political history, at that time, what has become somewhat of a norm, where men worked and as migrant

labourers, and left their wives behind in their rural homes, having to seek the leisure of other women at their working sites. Intertwined with this seeking of leisure was for those that were unfortunate the acquisition of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

“Social historians in particular have highlighted the dramatic effect of apartheid on sexuality; they point to how circular male-migration has long fuelled sexually transmitted infections among black South Africans denied permanent urban residence” (Hunter 2010: 4). This argument also interlinks with Corno and deWalque who say “a combination of factors actually suggests a potential positive correlation between labour migration in the mines and the risk of being infected with the HIV” (2012: 5). It does not take much to see how the labourers become susceptible to the spread of the HIV in the tavern context. The migration phenomenon itself was a huge factor, particularly in the mining context, where there were dire results particularly in the growth of HIV and AIDS in South Africa (Corno and deWalque, 2012). A sobering thought when one is in the tavern, but my two interlocutors were now deeply engaged in the tavern atmosphere.

The music was loud. I am sure one could hear it from several blocks away, and probably the only sad thing about the audio-speakers was the competition for sound with others from a nearby tavern. I waited in anticipation for my multiple interlocutors while Themba and Jack mingled with the crowd. Something noteworthy was the number of single women hanging out at the tavern. Single in the sense that they were there alone, some in small crowds and others as individuals, the ratio of women seemed to be higher than that of men, I could say on a scale of one to two. I engaged with one of the women as I was trying to get a glimpse of what this neighbourhood and vibrant place was about. I realised she was not forthcoming with much information until I offered to buy her a drink. It was as though an invitation to many more of her friends. In no time I was seated at a table with 3 unfamiliar women while Jack and Themba hungout closer to the bar. It was quite visible I was a “newbie” in the

neighbourhood from the way I talked, I did not have that “totsitaal” they were quite used to from the local men, and my roving eyes as I observed curiously the area also gave it away. The first female introduced herself as “Rose” with long braids brown in colour, dressed in fashionably torn jeans at the knees. She was quite conversant when prompted with questions. This was a 25 year old young lady from Bergville, KZN. She arrived to the Vaal triangle at the tender age of 16 years after giving birth to a baby boy whom she left at KZN with her grandparents. Rose related her attraction to the tavern, how it was filled mainly by local patrons and migrant workers and those with high income.

*“Most of the women here are prostitutes,” she said. “It’s bad. When you need money and you have to do that thing.”*

Rose continued her story and in some instances gave very sobering accounts of how she sustains herself through commercial sex work. Unlike her counterparts who sometimes sleep in the streets, she resorts to paying for weekly accommodation in one of the backyard rooms in the township. Rose is HIV positive (something she disclosed after a few drinks of alcohol). She told me she had not been to clinic for a long while, in the belief that she is still “strong,” as she put it, she felt she did not need the medication. In almost a casual manner she recounts on how she insists on protected intercourse, even though at times accepts a little extra cash for unprotected sex. *“And I do it because I need the money,”* she said.

Rose’s parents are both late and were migrant workers. Her father worked for Steelworx South Africa. Her mother was a domestic worker while her father worked at the furnace. Her parents both lost their lives in a motor vehicle accident. She was left to fend for herself and refused to return to her hometown of birth. *“There are better prospects of making money here”*, she said. Taverns were lucrative spots for women wanting to make a quick buck

overnight. *“Sometimes you are tired and you just want money,” she says. “Sometimes you just wanna sleep alone. You can’t do this job everyday. But I need money so I can’t sleep.”*

This was one of the many sobering stories I picked up in my time at the Vaal triangle. Vulnerable women are drawn to areas where working men with money are willing to spend it in taverns and make sexual transactions with them. As much as Rose’s story is different, her circumstances are similar to other women around the tavern. It is emblematic of the suffering of other women in the steel valley. These afflictions are not as a result of someone forcing them or accident, but are a result of human agency. Choosing to live in Gauteng where there are purported prospects of making better money, a human decision was behind it. Choosing to have unprotected sex was also a conscious decision, however it does not take away the forces constraining her options. This is “insidious suffering,” as Farmer (1996) says, where economic forces have brought about risk in their structures for occupational and communicable diseases. In circumstances not of their own making, commercial sex workers go to these spaces of recreation to seek ways of making ends meet, and by so doing compound the risks of not only their health but also of people already exposed to perilous working conditions. In a way the imbalance of the socio-economic structures that already exist further exacerbate the health risk of the employees leaving them to suffer from communicable and occupational diseases. This complicates the work of social responsibility in a situation where occupational health and safety is receiving limited attention.

The local hospital was congested with cases of HIV related cases as I remembered from my visit with George. According to the staffing nurse, just like in mining towns where TB (Tuberculosis) and HIV/AIDS are significant health risks, the lifestyles don’t differ. In comparison to mining towns HIV infection increases susceptibility to TB particularly in underground mines. “Exposure to silica (for instance) in gold mining operations together with HIV infection multiply the risk of active TB” (Hermanus, 2007: 535). This is an indication

that occupational diseases do not go alone but that there is a relationship between communicable and occupational diseases as well, creating complexities in diagnosis and treatment. With the advent of HIV, cases of misdiagnosis are rampant and susceptibility to infection under gaseous conditions, dust exposure and humidity is much higher. Smith (2015) also asserts that the disease is up to six times more in South Africa's mining towns than it is in the general population. This is not surprising as discussed earlier that men in mining areas tend to attract commercial sex workers, which leads to the spread of HIV.

Particular processes are put in place as CSR initiatives and a push strategy for the company's health and safety in the community even though communicable diseases are seen as distinct from occupational diseases. This may be that the two diseases are acquired from two distinct spaces even though the effect may be one – illness and debilitation and eventually death.

When I spoke to Thandi about the problems of commercial sex work in mining towns and similar extractive areas like the Vaal, she told me as much as they promoted self-sustenance in the community, prostitution was definitely not one of them.

*"I mean, we have programs to assist women in the community (she said that with a voice sounding a bit strained, an indication of frustration as she showed some wrinkle on her forehead)...a lot of them attend, but some fall back into their trade, and we have no way of stopping them but just try to discourage them and tell them that if they persevere with our program their circumstances will change. A lot of them want instant change...we have adult literacy and health care programs."*

On my second field trip visit to Vanderbeijlpark I was fortunate enough to accompany Thandi to one of the health training sessions for females. The programs are facilitated by an NGO and she saw to the running of these programs. There was much anticipation to her coming as



she always brought news about funds and how much the company was going to chip in every now and again.

Being a closed door session, for confidentiality purposes as some were deemed vulnerable individuals I could only stay in for so long before they began their work. Interesting to note was the makeup of the attendants in the room. There were about 30 females of mixed race, more than half whose age seemed barely in their early twenties. I saw older women too about 2 in number with grey hair above their fifties from my guess. The rest could have been in their thirties. This was an indication of the non-discriminatory nature of poverty in women.

Even without my much anticipated participants I was hoping I would meet but never arrived, after my conversation with Rose and her friends no doubt gave me new perspective on life in Orange Farm and Sebokeng. The patrons in the taverns dealt with their humiliating circumstances and eroded life chances through engaging in prostitution and alcohol dependence. Taverns and other spaces attract voracious relationships against the more vulnerable and this particular case – the women — this in itself highlighting the face of poverty in the community.

### **View from the Community**

Apart from the reports by the pressure groups on pollution, ordinary residents in general seem ignorant of the dangers that surround their community. With the exception of those that have been afflicted or know friends or relatives that are afflicted. The few people I spoke to were either not aware or just did not care.

*"I've lived here for over twenty years so I don't know what the fuss is about,"* said one man from Muvhango extension. *"I even lived in Sharpeville before I came here, nothing has happened to me."*

In a discussion I had in the early days of my arrival I spoke to a shop owner in the CBD of Vanderbeijlpark, a gentleman who runs a takeaway shop. I had been chatting to him about why I was there, and he told me a sobering story about how the company he owned was contracted in one of the firms near the plant. He always had a predisposition to lung infection. It did not take him long to get lung complications when he started working at the industrial sites. He was forced to give up his company and open a food outlet eventually as a source of income. I asked him how he attributed that to Steelworx, *“I know because they give out the largest amount of pollution around here,”* he said. Although his claims could not be substantiated further, there are many other people who also attribute their ill-fate to Steelworx even without any solid evidence. In many cases this is caused by a particular perception and feeling towards something. Perhaps more frustrated by their own vulnerabilities and seeking someone or something to blame for reasons of expediency.

Some dismissals of the harm caused by Steelworx even bordered around conspiracy theories. *“We know these people don’t want to give us jobs, people always say if you work at the plant you’ll get sick, how come there are people working there for so many years?”* these people referred to the politicians and other lobby groups that peddle the story on the harm caused by the plant. It does not help that the lobby groups are predominantly run by white people who also seem to have influence within the communities. For some this has been seen as a way of not employing black people and keeping them poor, as they would say.

The story of safety has been told differently in different quarters. But as expected the company would present one of responsibility and adherence to the national safety regulations. Some of the programs stated do not often go quite as expected, because of the struggles and complexities involved in implementing CSR. Welker (2014) shows these complexities. In *Enacting the Corporation*, she examines how different actors with different interests within the corporation try to meet their own interests in enacting the corporation as a collective



subject. These actors range from employees, company executives and consultants in making relevant their own disciplines. CSR finds its relevance mostly when the interests of the corporation are brought into question, as most of the times ameliorate disciplines are regarded as costly than profit making (Welker 2014).

This chapter shows the failure of CSR in aiding the workers that came out of the working system. It would be unfair to write-off the CSR project as a total failure as there are some sections of the community that benefit from the charitable work that is implemented by the company. However priorities and precedence needs to take place within the company, which brings back the argument of those opposed to CSR as seeing it as just another capitalist project to benefit business.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **WORK CONDITIONS AND CORPORATION CSR**

#### **My Arrival Story**

In the month of March 2016, I weaved through a maze of industrial firms in the small town of Vanderbijlpark after braving through the scorching sun for 40 minutes. I got pointed to the Steelworx premises eventually by some pedestrians I had met on the road. My arrival was subsequent to an earlier visit to the community a week before. My visit to the plant was prompted by a member of management staff I had engaged with earlier in the community. Walking through a meandering road dropping off on the R553 coming from Johannesburg I finally made my way to the security check point. I went past sign posts within the premises but outside the gated security. One sign post I cannot shake my head off from was “National Key Point” written all over it in big bold letters with reference to the National Key Point Act written at the bottom.

As I walked through the gates I only wondered what lay beyond those long and high steel gates and fencing. A distinct loud noise of crinkling metal and haulage trucks and thick smoke filled the air from the plant. I had now entered the space of harm production as it were. The large and imposing structure felt intimidating. It was like nothing I had ever seen before. Huge cylindrical steel pipes ran horizontally across the yard like train coaches while others ran vertically. Several other towering pipes which could be spotted over a mile away stood in the middle of all this seemingly chaotic maze of steel pipes, letting off some smoke from the furnaces. These furnace pipes created a thick cloud of white smoke which trickled upwards as though in search of victims (victims in the literal sense) as exposure to airborne metal pollutants leads to acute and chronic diseases in humans and damage on the environment too,

an exercise which the area was all too familiar with. The trail of smoke ghosted upwards, spreading in all directions.

Negotiating entrance into the plant was not an easy process; there was a long bureaucratic chain I had to experience to get a mere response. Eventually through my perseverance the red tape was untangled but only partially. My feat of negotiations came with conditions, amongst them was not to interfere with work and certain office spaces I was not allowed to access. These spaces were not clearly indicated to me again once inside my time would be limited I was told. Part of the reason according to management was that the plant is a National Key Point.

National Key Points are just one category of secret ‘security’ sites. These are premises regarded as places of national security. It must be borne in mind that the “National Key Point Act” originated in 1980 during the apartheid era. This was part of the statutes that made it easy for the government to run the country with little accountability or worry about having to explain poor planning bad decisions or just outright corruption. According to the Right to Know (R2K) Activist Factsheet on National Key Points, they are still regarded as a means to undermine transparency. The right to know activists also argue that National Key Points are used to guard certain establishments from denunciation they are broader forms of laws designed to undermine the process of democracy. This is done through keeping information, private and public and democratic spaces secluded. In as much as the safeguarding of critical infrastructure is important surely one does not expect to be able to walk with liberty into a nuclear power station or enter with the greatest of ease into “Nkandla” – the state president’s homestead.

Taking me back to the sign post I had seen outside, I understood its symbolism now. If anything that sign served as the symbol of power the company had in with-holding

information and keeping all things within the plant secretive. It restrains its workers from engaging in strike protests within or a certain distance from the company perimeter. Such power impacts directly as well at the ability of the public to democratically deliberate and engage with the company. It further entrenches unaccountability in public and private bodies. Despite all this knowledge that I had acquired much later about National Key Points the sign had meant little to me at the time. Still awed by this huge infrastructure I got an understanding of why Steelworx was labelled a steel giant in the literal sense.

The safe working routines gave me confidence as I moved around, as these routines were enforced by management's control of the production process. Even though it was a seemingly safe working environment because of a sequence of safety actions regularly followed, health and safety issues were still contentious and regularly negotiated.

During my visit the burning issues that I heard about through interviews were ones of 'back strains', 'sound thresholds', and stress-related high blood pressure from heat. I spoke to some workers who had been complaining of these problems and wanted to bring them forth to management. I was forbidden from going near the furnaces, but from my observation workers not only perceived distinct temperatures on the shop floor, but also different kinds of noises even where the noises were loud. I could hear sounds of the hammers along with the milling and grinding machines simultaneously from a distance, all giving distinct noises. I could only imagine the intensity of the sounds for those that worked near them. Speaking to one particular worker about how they handled the sounds, in their own words said, "*They resemble the heart-beat, and you get used to them.*" On the contrary, I never got used to their distressing high peak tonality and their unpredictable sequences. It is no wonder that this noise pollution had its toll on the workers. High noises and high temperature circulate along the shop floor connecting men and machines together, but also creating fields of contrasts, conflicts and negotiations.

The substantive skewness in power relations between the employer and employee seems to have led to their constant collision. Despite the formal labour contract that sees equality in the stakeholders, which include employees, unions, communities, NGOs, government etc., the emphasis in the workplace seemed to be more on financial and product output and less emphasis on an employee relations approach. The workers were seeking some form of corporate governance. The importance of corporate governance is that it focuses on the employees as equal decision making bodies. As a broad view of CSR, incorporating labour improves the organisational performance and is significant in advancing CSR practices (Young and Thyil 2009: 181).

During a lunch break one former trade union leader I spoke to, Tshepo, told me the furnaces received higher incidences of casualties. Some potent and volatile chemicals are released in the manufacture of steel. Minerals such as limestone, coke and iron ore are used in the production of steel during a 12 hour process, and this is where these toxins are produced. “Coke oven emissions contain cancer-causing poly-nuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, along with toxic gases and vapours such as benzene, hydrogen sulphide, carbon monoxide and ammonia” (Code of Practice on Safety and Health in The Iron and Steel Industry 2005). High temperatures are also needed in the production of steel, hence workers around the ovens find themselves exposed to excessive temperatures that can cause heat stress and in other instances suffer from burns from the coke and ovens. Another dangerous aspect of the ovens was the glare that came from molten metals under high temperatures, causing injuries to eyes (ILO Code 2005).

A whole host of other activities within the plant are dangerous, Tshepo stated. There are molten metal splatters and spills in the production of steel, also occurring during its transportation to various departments for processing, which poses as a danger to those handling it. Workers who are also engaged in burning away the impurities from steel find

themselves for the most part exposed to noise, burns and fumes. As he took me through the process of how the steel is made, I got the understanding that every process produces its own level of danger from the toxic and dusty raw materials thrown in the furnace to the molten material, that is transported to other areas for shaping and tapping to the finished product when it is sprayed and coated. The sprays and coating materials contain their own amount of hazards. Even though I was not fortunate enough to see some of this, I had been given a vivid picture of the operation surrounding the furnaces by Tshepo.

Lunch break almost resembled high school break-time. A lot of chattering went on as men carrying their lunch boxes abandoned their work stations for recess with some of them streaming to the canteen. Surely the labour was stressful and intense, but yet the workers seemed high spirited. Tshepo did not quite mingle with other employees, during his recess he pulled out his lunch-box and went to sit in his car. He had asked me to join him as he headed to the parking lot where his car was parked in which I obliged. Our position in the parking lot was a good vantage point to see workers who were bee-lining at the gate waiting for their turn to be frisk searched as they exited the gates. This is how Tshepo related his story as we observed the gate. For those he was familiar with as they passed the gate he told me a little tale about their experience in the company. Most were stories of injuries or cases of collision (figurative) with management.

*"A lot has changed now we have regular check-ups for lung infections from the floor. Even our safety equipment looks better, and there are now punitive measures for not wearing appropriate clothing. The company has lost a lot of money from accidents,"* said Tshepo.

What I discovered was CSR is regulated by health and safety regulations for workers. There is a nexus of the two that enacts the social responsibility for workers' safety. When I spoke to Thandi about how they enforce CSR in workers' safety, she replied by telling me that the two

concepts were separate entities but could be enforced together, as Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) was more explicit with regards to what and how employees conduct themselves. CSR provides the framework on how OHS engages, and the expectations that society demands within a social model. From my understanding CSR was just the broader outlook for workers' health and safety. When operating the employer was enforcing health and safety regulations. CSR does not have a set of safety regulations but has certain expectations of what is to come out of a given situation socially and economically.

Consistent with the safety regulations I realised the importance of why workers' knowledge of health and safety was vital. Not only was it crucial as a way of saving their lives, but it was part of the broader form of the production process. Occupational health and safety in preventing injuries had been incorporated very well in the production process, through the use of high-tech equipment to make and monitor production without exposing workers to danger, and the production of steel by emitting less carbon and other toxic impurities. This process is highly technical, but, in brief, NS devised a new process called the IFCON process. This process has the capacity to produce steel through coal and iron ore without having to go through other phases that tend to emit a lot of toxins, therefore reducing the toxic levels of steel production. This was a new measure of CSR after pressures from activist groups on the high emission levels. According to Tshepo, gas emissions are constantly monitored on the shop-floor to make sure they fall within national and international regulations, failure of which could mean a default could result in the product as well.

The high-tech equipment came with great efficiency and less toxic exposure for the workers, and reduced capital requirement for the shareholders. What were the deeper implications for the workers though? As the old maxim goes "the more things change the more they stay the same." The new operation meant downsizing the workforce leaving particular social and material realities for the working class still the same. Increased unemployment and economic



deprivation was created. As welcome as the move was for the CSR movement to offer itself in-light of environmental activism, labour resistance, community uprisings to be the saving grace, as well as being in the midst of exercising ethics as a new currency for corporate capitalism, nonetheless new geographies of poverty and inequality were created.

### **Spinning the Safety Story**

On one of my morning travels to the Vaal I went to meet people I thought would give me management's perspective on the operations at the company. Ironically, structured within the same vicinity were offices as one enters the main gate. The turn into the offices was an exposure to a different world. An environment with air-conditioning, carpets and noises of a different kind, ones of Xerox machines (computers, printers and copiers), which introduced me to another class of workers. These were the pen pushers of the company, the white collar class. In these offices I met MP, a very pleasant middle aged female who articulated herself very well and had a way of evading what could have been uncomfortable questions for her. Through her mannerism I could see she was familiar with the subject and questions posed to her. Although not a Public Relations (PR) officer she may well have been.

Millions of Rands are spent on CSR staff to protect the reputation of the company. The company portrays itself as a responsible corporate citizen through many media, from its employees to its magazines, "romanticising" its public image. They highlight the community work they engage in, their charity work and educational programs and how safe their working environment is. In a corporate setting where masculinity is exercised and shapes the men's identity in many elaborate ways (Allison 1994). The gender role of female staff in the department is strategically centred. Whether it is deliberate or unintended their presence served an emotive appeal to the human consciousness, a stereotype Thandi often re-enforced.

*“...women at the centre call me sis’ Thandi and find it easy to open up to me may be because I’m a woman” she said one afternoon, telling me about her projects, “...and the little ones at the learning centres call me mam’ Thandi, I introduced myself that way to them.”*

Despite the environmental mishaps, to put it lightly, MP never denied their existence, the air pollution, land and water contamination. Her position is that the safety policy and practices had changed from that of old. As much as she could not give the technical explanation like Tshepo could on the plant operations and the new processes, she emphasised how the company followed regulations and did not compromise.

Thandi went into the “trenches” and served more in the frontline and gave the human dimension to the company. MP had a Human Resources (HR) background and paused as a more corporate type of figure who understood regulations and was less of an outdoor individual.

*MP: Safety is our priority, our safety standards in the country have improved over time...it’s been many years since I can think of a fatal accident. (With some confidence which had a little boastfulness in it as she carried on to say). I’m the one responsible for making sure our workers, work in an environment that is safe and protected. We have a very strict approach to health and safety and initiatives to raise awareness.*

She told me how important it was to keep the stakeholders in the form of employees safe and healthy. Our conversation did not go on for long before she referred me across the hall to a colleague of hers I shall name Betty. A tall and well-dressed light in complexion lady, very welcoming too, she occupied a much smaller office space, probably because of her junior rank. She was more than willing to discuss the work they were doing in promoting education and upliftment of communities. She demonstrated the company’s track record in community development in education particularly in the construction of technology centres and

empowering lives through education projects through the stories and some instances showed me photographs of her fieldwork.

*“The steel industry is facing a tough time, we want to increase our prices but government is preventing us,”* said one company official, when I asked him what they were doing about unemployment in the community, *“if anything we need to downsize the staff...Steelworx is paying the price for a lot of atrocities from the past by NS this has had a heavy burden on the budget of the company,”* he said.

CSR has a dimension which represents itself in a counterfactual way. It works excellently when there are no foreseeable challenges. When problems do occur, its counterfactual side is highly visible, i.e. toxic spills or human rights scandals or when the company has lost its “social license” (Welker 2014: 41).

## **Compensation**

The law has played a pivotal role in how the corporations manoeuvre in dealing with workers compensation and their responsibility on harm towards their employees, as I found in an interview with George Kahn interview. Since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, statutory law set the tone of how companies engage with accountability and responsibility in their perilous operations. This segment sets out to look into the laws and regulations that influence the operation of the corporation. At the same time, contrastingly, the laws set the grounds for legitimacy in oppressing the workers.

Towards the end of May, 2016 I had spent the day with George Kahn, a young gentleman in partnership with Richard Spoor, at Richard Spoor Attorneys, two weeks after the South Gauteng High Court ruling on the class action Act. I felt I had just had a lesson in introductory law if ever there was such a course from George, a passionate protagonist of workers’ compensation, and, as expected, well versed on the statutes governing workers’

compensation. What I had learnt in essence is that the industrial companies *had* and *could* protect themselves against litigation. Despite the OHS Act of 1993 which lays the burden of safety mostly with the employers. The Act gives strict guidelines as to how employers should conduct themselves. Amongst the top ten most important rules of the Act is that the employer should “provide a safe working environment for employees”, and to appoint and establish safety representatives and committees and that employers should take responsibilities for employees’ action amongst other things and provide free and personal protective equipment (OHS Act of 1993).

Then what incentivises them to compensate or, better still, protect their employees from harmful exposure? A healthy workforce improves productivity of a company and improves public image. In South Africa CSR is guided by The King’s Report on Governance for South Africa, 2009, which states that the core principles of governance for companies in South Africa are to rid of the apartheid practices which create social injustices and these practices are also found to be fundamentally unsustainable (The King Report on Governance for South Africa, 2009). Unlike other codified international governing bodies in business, for example the International Finance Corporation (IFC), where breach of its codes carries legal punishment, the King’s code does not have legal weight. It is viewed as a non-binding authority by the courts and is just a collection of opinions by corporate directors on how to run a company, or as George Kahn describes it, “...it is a form of social etiquette, and makes business somewhat predictable and polite”. It is this that brings the question: to what extent are the corporations obligated to do what they do, and at what cost?

George Kahn decided to school me on two of the most prominent statutes which cover workers’ compensation to date in the mining and other industries (extractive and manufacturing) are ODMWA (Occupational Diseases in Mines and Works Act) and COIDA (Compensation for Occupational Injuries Disease Act). The main challenge with ODMWA is

that it stems from the repressive era, and was designed to cater for a handful number of (white) workers hence at the time of its inception the government felt that they had an obligation to look after the so called “first class” citizens, and because of that, the limited resources at that time allowed for government to compensate with little strain on the fiscals. In the period exceeding 1994, this became a strenuous feat and unsustainable. The reason being that the laws that catered for a minority now cater for all employees regardless of their class or colour. This law was then supplemented by COIDA, which draws revenue from contributions made by both the companies and their employees. How do these laws enhance or suppress the practice of safety in the workplace and spread of occupational diseases? Or much rather to what extent do these laws make the company (Steelworx) socially responsible?

Although some efforts may seem to be in place to be socially responsible to the community some workers still seem discontent on issues dealing with workers’ health. As one of the staff members I spoke to at the plant put it, *“the workers who are ill are paid through the compensation Act that’s if our doctors find them eligible.”* Occupational health diseases are taken care of by compensation. In an implicit manner it is a dissociation of responsibility from any harm inducing activities.

The statutory laws are archaic and disempowering. They were made to protect the employers from constant lawsuits which were pre-eminent at the time of their inception because of poor working conditions which would see workers frequently get sick or injured from operations. These statutory laws became another front of subjugation for the workers, creating great suffering, as workers constantly fell ill but could not claim much compensation. Workers till this day get compensated under these two laws. In places where the sole bread winner has lost their job or cannot perform optimally because of job injury or illness it goes without saying as mentioned in the previous chapters that suffering is created. Families are deprived of

economic power or livelihood. These laws are put there systematically to disenfranchise the economically weak at the expense of big powerful businesses. Government intervention seems to be lacking to ensure minimum standards are adhered to. Government as an authoritative figure can police the standards rather than create new ones as a starting point.

### **Class Action Lawsuit**

In the beginning of 2016 the media captured a classic case which bears a lot of significance to the compensation laws in the steel industry as well as other mining sectors: the class action lawsuit against over 30 gold mining companies by their employees. It has been dubbed as a landmark victory for mine workers in decades by media, pressure groups and other interested parties. The same law that Sipho negotiated his compensation under was found to be unconstitutional in the constitutional court against the Gold miners, when in their defence Anglo-Gold Ashanti claimed that Mankayi (plaintiff) was precluded by law under COIDA to make his law-suit because the statutory laws work on a “non-blame” policy.

The significance of the class action lawsuit in this study is that it seeks to undermine these repressive laws and allows for impoverished workers to take on multi-national corporations *en masse* without getting inconsistent decisions by the courts. The litigation is the first of its kind in South Africa. Considering the history of South Africa in the extractive industry this bears significance in redressing atrocities. The other significance is that although it happened in the gold mining industry it sends out “warning shots” to other extractive industries of meeting a similar fate if they do not change their approach in dealing with pollution and occupational hazards.

According to George Kahn, “*this has opened way for the class action which is relatively new in the legal system. The class action does not deal with individuals but with a number of plaintiffs who are also not identifiable*”.

The allegations by the plaintiffs in this class action suit bear resemblance to that of the Steelworx workers. The working conditions created respiratory diseases which are debilitating and force some workers out on early retirement. Bound by the same laws as (gold) mine workers when it comes to seeking restitution from their employers, the steel plant employees find their hands tied. The class action lawsuit for gold miners has a lot of significance in setting precedence for further law suits by employees in various sectors with identical conditions against their employers.

The biggest challenge for the workers is proving that a particular illness was caused by the working conditions. To avoid constant legal battles, the WCA (1914) required that any claims made had to prove that a particular illness was synonymous and peculiar to that working environment chemical found in that operation. Generic or opportunistic illnesses that arise as a result of toxins were dismissed making it difficult for workers to claim compensation for them. This brings about the controversy which analysts have argued and regarded as reductionist, it takes multiple or a combination of toxins to get specific diseases (Markowitz and Rosner, 2004). "...many environmental exposures can be addressed only by comparing populations rather than individuals..," (Pekkanen and Pierce 2001: 1).



## CONCLUSION

So as I sat outside George's yard during one of the afternoons as we chatted I looked at this gigantic tree across the road from his yard and I imagined it as this exotic tree planted in the middle of an impoverished area brought to bear fruit and nourishment for the hungry and malnourished people in the area. Although, its roots were planted deep underground they spread all the way across to a foreign continent where it received its water and fertiliser from. This tree was planted by a gigantic farmer who came from across the seas and oceans with a guise to bring shade and nourishment to the people but in actual fact it was much easier to plant there than anywhere else (because of fertile land and cheap labour). Everyone was very excited to have this tree and yet the fruits it bore did not quite give out the fruits people anticipated. Right at the top of this huge tree only the giant farmer could access the desired fruits. The fruits hanging within reach for the hungry people were not very desirable. Infact in some cases people got sick from the fruits, and then eventually developed a disliking for the tree. The people in the community could not get rid of this tree when they discovered its effects because it was well planted and set within the land. The custodians of the land had it protected from any harm in the event that the community wanted to tear it down. Such is my simplistic analogy of Steelworx plant as the tree that never bore the desired fruits. One may see it as this huge plant that is meant to take care of the community and nourish its people and get them out of this poverty. Such trees are planted all across the continent in many cases bring more hunger and misery and its fruits only ripped by those with access to the ripe and healthy fruits at the top, those with access to ladders .

Through this study I learnt that Steelworx does little by way corporate responsibility in supporting the afflicted workers and their communities suffering from illness. It has little sense of the challenges faced by their employees and has a calculating way of approaching these challenges with their employees and communities. Taking over from a racialized operation in the country, they bring a glimmer of hope for some in the communities they operate in and the country at large, while also enjoying government protection in terms of market shares and operating regulations—case in point, the import tax imposed on Chinese steel, which essentially gave Steelworx the monopoly over steel in the country. This unwittingly gives the company excessive power, while those with little socio-economic power become its subjects like the “scavengers” for scrap metal whose civil liberties are hidden under the guise of free trade and providing an opportunity to poor members of the community meanwhile their destiny is pre-determined by the powerful cartels. One may attribute the lax laws by the government on TNCs to the country’s need for foreign investment hence on many occasions opening up its people to exploitation. These stories of exploitation in Africa are not new, but each location tells a different story of how it manifests itself. It is through neo-liberalism that governments have absolved their powers to TNCs and because of the peculiarity of South Africa’s political set-up where the ruling party is tied up with the labour unions, and the unions have become somewhat impotent as well.

Environmental pollution is rampant in the Steel Valley. It has developed over time and the damage has been epic on both the environment and its inhabitants. The Steelworx plant sets itself in the heart of an impoverished community and rips the metal resources as though unconscious of its surroundings. Using the tree analogy, it siphoned all the minerals to the detriment of the environment and people’s livelihood. Unlike in the tree analogy, TNCs’ effects on suffering are not as obvious. Steelworx SA’s effects are more complex as they run deeper than the hunger and malnourishment from the tree. There are structural forces which

take away human agency and force people in precarious positions is virtually in every sphere of the community (afflicted and retired steelworkers, mothers with ill babies, commercial sex workers, businessmen etc.). To avoid a revolt from the local communities which is a possibility one cannot rule out in these days of service delivery and anti-corruption protests in South Africa, MNCs need to consider Adam Smith's doctrine of commutative justice versus beneficence.

Self-sustenance without help from the company is a mammoth task. Relying on capital from CSR projects is the next best option for some, making people dependent on the company. Considering the company employs over 70 percent of the households in the Vaal triangle, a great dependency is created on the company, further entrenching its power and dominance in the country's economy notwithstanding the fact that the country is highly reliant on its steel. 80 percent of the steel the country consumes comes from the company (Cosatu Press Statements 2016).

"The poor generally have access only to areas that have higher risk for health and income generation. And they generally lack the resources to reduce the exposure to the risk or to invest in alleviating the causes of such risk" (Malik 1998). People cannot determine their lives going forward because of the selective funding the company offers, which allows only for a pre-determined course for those that seek restitution from the company.

*"If you're a practitioner and fail to engage with patients in their history, habits, personality and fears, you're practicing veterinary medicine,"* as one Doctor mentioned. Without

engaging with the patients and assisting them to take care of their health the clinics pump the patients with drugs and treat the health service like an assembly line.

For over three decades now CSR has presented itself in developing countries as an answer to alleviating poverty and different modes of suffering. Political governments and corporate have often been accused by pundits of creating the illusion that the processes of neoliberalism are for the greater good of the poor. It is these ideologies which have created the platform for the practices of old to continue marginalising the impoverished in a different guise.

Questions of suffering are brought to the fore as we examine the effects of the structural forces that inflict themselves to the Steel Valley community. Does the woman who carries her baby to the clinic and watches helplessly her baby crying because it is in pain from a disease she has never heard of suffer more than that man who drags himself constantly to the same clinic to get a concoction of drugs to help him extend his lease of life as much as he understands where his pain comes from, or rather than the man who has lost his job and now stands to lose more of his material possession and has no one to turn to in terms of structural support? The premature and painful illness which people endure due to the harmful production of steel is visible in some instances, but the personal cost of restructuring one's life as a result of job loss is an assault on dignity and self-esteem and hence a form of hidden suffering. This is a conundrum that critical and reflexive anthropologists on "suffering" as an area of study will have to continue giving critical analysis on.

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