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Mine workers social recognition of the environmental costs of mining: a case study of Mopani copper mine and Kankoyo Township, Mufulira-Zambia

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Abstract

This study investigates the environmental costs of copper mining in a mining Township of Kankoyo in Mufulira, Zambia. It investigates the ways in which the mine workers in this community experience, assess and respond to the pervasive environmental degradation caused by mining operations. The study indicates that the people of Kankoyo have an implied understanding (physical experiences e.g. smoke, dust etc.) of the risks in their environment but lack explicit knowledge (long term effects). Second, the working class are now in an awkward position between participating in activism against the company that pollutes their environment and the need to keep their jobs. Third, experiences with a polluted environment have divided the Kankoyo between those who engage in community mobilisation (the unemployed) and those who don't because they want to protect their jobs (the mine workers). As experiences take a gender dimension, women tend to suffer more due to the gender roles they play. Fourth, given their helplessness, the people of Kankoyo now plead for social services not in social justice terms but as a compensation for the pollution suffered.

The core conclusion is that workers understand environmental threats but: (a) they have little awareness of the long-term effects and (b) they tend to minimise them. For these workers their economic security i.e. employment, is primary and they prioritise the immediate over the longer term, thus (c) they have not responded to this issue in an organised way, rather their unions tend to focus on traditional workplace/pay issues. In addition, state and environmental organisations' responses are inadequate. Consequently, the community is forced to accept the negative environmental impacts on their lives and the environment. Therefore, the study makes the following arguments: (a) Mineral resource led development in Zambia has failed. Instead, it has led to devastating environmental and health impacts on the nearby communities; (b) that the provision of social services and housing to the mine workers, and revenue to the government only served to divert attention from the long term and ongoing environmental degradation that has taken place overtime. The slug dams, the accumulated dust heaps, leach plants and long term environmental degradation on the copperbelt attest to this; (c) that the corporate policy on housing only served the interests of the mining companies by stabilising the workforce without regard for the arising health impacts; and; (d) privatisation has increased the vulnerability of the working class to environmental costs of mining. In the end, from the shattered hopes of a good life 'modernisation' emerges in the words of one respondent a 'development' of 'environmental suffering', as Kankoyo remains a 'bomb waiting to explode'.