



Media statement by the Bench Marks Foundation

British shareholders castigated for taking gold's profit

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

South Africa could have been a wealthy country with all its citizens enjoying a decent standard of living had some of the returns from gold mining stayed here instead of making huge profits for mainly British shareholders, according to the Bench Marks Foundation.

The claim is part of a ground-breaking study into the history of Soweto from the early 1900s which has concluded that decades of colonialism, apartheid and gold mining has condemned its several million residents, most of whom are black, to a legacy of health and environmental challenges.

The study, called "Waiting to inhale", is the result of three years of research into households of Riverlea, Diepkloof, Meadowlands and Doornkop in and near Soweto, and the health challenges they face as a result of their proximity to mine waste areas.

Published by Bench Marks Foundation, it outlines how those who provided the sweat equity for the mineral wealth from gold were needed in the city of gold, but not wanted as co-inhabitants. Consequently, they were forced to live on the worst, least valuable, land in the city – land on which both urban and mine waste was deposited.

Today, although industrial mining in Johannesburg is more or less "done and dusted", Bench Marks says, the destructive environmental and health impact of mining on communities nearby "rages on unabated".

The study spells out the health and environmental challenges of the four communities studied and notes that these apply to mine impacted communities nationally. These include the effect of acid mine drainage, the prevalence of respiratory illnesses due to mine-related dust, and the potential harm caused by high levels of radioactive material to which they are exposed living close to tailings and slimes dams.

It calls on the South African Human Rights Commission to investigate the pollution legacy and violations of the constitutional right of residents of these communities to a healthy and safe environment. It says the communities would welcome public hearings in the affected areas.

Soweto lies in a basin to the south and south west and directly below the mines of the Central Rand, from Langlaagte and Crown Mines in the east through to Durban Roodepoort Deep (DRD) and Doornkop in the west. This means that much of the runoff from the Vaal River watershed runs down off the Witwatersrand ridge, and past the mines and mine waste through Soweto.

Noting that most histories of Soweto begin with the 1976 students riots, the research goes back to the earliest days of the township at the turn of the 20th century.

With the outbreak of the plague in 1903 in Johannesburg, a panicked response argued that the presence of rats was the result of slum areas, and a zinc fence was erected around Newtown which was burnt to the ground. The black residents were relocated to temporary housing in Klipspruit (Pimville) where the Johannesburg City Council erected wood and zinc shacks, thus creating the first residents of what was later to be known as Soweto.

The study says that the life of “decency and comfort” sought by the white population of Johannesburg meant that they could not live downwind of the mine slimes/tailings, or downstream of the water pollution emanating from the mines or the sewage from the city.

“Hence the black townships were all located topographically lower than the white city and its lush suburbs, downwind from the mine tailings and the ensuing toxic dust and the mine-polluted rivers flowing off the Witwatersrand.”

ENDS

Bench Marks Foundation is an independent non-governmental organisation mandated by churches to monitor the practices of multi-national corporations to

- ensure they respect human rights;
- protect the environment;
- ensure that profit-making is not done at the expense of other interest groups; and
- ensure that those most negatively impacted upon are heard, protected and accommodated within the business plans of the corporations.

The Foundation was launched in 2001 by the Rt Rev Dr Jo Seoka who chairs the organisation and by member churches of the SACC.

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