



Media statement by the Bench Marks Foundation

Call for compensation into asbestos in Soweto

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Bench Marks Foundation has called for a parliamentary enquiry into compensation for residents of Soweto whose houses still contain asbestos, despite the building material having been banned on 28 March 2008.

Bench Marks has also called on the government to ensure the removal of all asbestos material in housing in Soweto within six months, following the release of a study that revealed that the dangerous material is still widely present in houses in the area.

This is one of the findings of a new study by the Bench Marks Foundation, released today, into living conditions in four suburbs of Soweto. Entitled "Waiting to inhale", the study's research, which was conducted over three years, shows the impact of over a century of mining activity in Johannesburg.

Bench Marks has recommended that Parliament, through its portfolio committee for environmental affairs, investigate why so many communities, such as Riverlea, remain exposed to asbestos, despite its banning.

"We call on Parliament to establish a national parliamentary enquiry into compensation and other remedial systems to make necessary changes to end the impact of asbestos on Soweto and Riverlea communities. The enquiry should investigate how communities can have a direct say in the multidisciplinary asbestos advisory group (MAAG) that was to have been set up following the 1998 asbestos national summit," Bench Marks says.

The study reveals that 97% of roofs in Riverlea Zone 1, one of the suburbs studied, are still made of asbestos. In Diepkloof, the occurrence of asbestos roofing is 66.3% of housing, while in Meadowlands it is 53.3%.

This is in spite of authorities and the mining industry being fully aware of the risks of asbestos since the 1960s, but nevertheless continuing to use the material extensively in townships.

"Could this be ascribed to an economic system that values life by class and race, and the need for cheap labour and the maximising of profits?" Bench Marks asks.

Exposure to asbestos is closely linked to cancer of the lungs, larynx and ovaries, mesothelioma (a form of cancer affecting the inner linings of the lungs) and asbestosis (scarring of the lungs). In addition, the co-exposure to tobacco smoke and asbestos substantially increases the risk of lung cancers.

"Black township housing development has historically comprised the erection of low cost housing. The white minority was not 'comfortable' with the black majority becoming urbanised during colonialism and apartheid.

"This meant that township or location development always occurred on the least economic viable, most compromised land and that only the cheapest building materials were used. The cheapest building materials included mine tailings for mixing cement, and asbestos sheet roofing," the study says.

The history of Soweto from its beginnings in the early 1900s is included in the study, one of the few comprehensive accounts of the area that cover the years before the student uprising in 1976.

It notes that during the 1950s, the majority of the African population of South Africa "lost all control over their lives in this period of seeming corporate largess, charitable gestures and racist paternalism.

“They were deprived of having any choice of where they could live, were denied the right to own housing in urban areas, had no say in the shape, size or colour of the houses, or the size of the stands on which the houses were constructed. They also had no say in the building materials used to construct the houses, which often included cement mixed with radioactive mine tailings sand, and asbestos roofing. This would have significant health impacts on generations of Sowetans.”

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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