

To mine or not to mine?

Jasper Finkeldey
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The Alternative Indaba initiated by faith-based groups eight years ago is a forum to discuss alternatives to the mining rush that brought more doom than gloom over the African continent and beyond. JASPER FINKELDEY reports back from this month's forum which called for the mining industry to be made more accountable.

Dark floors, white walls, conference participants in ties and formal dresses. From the red armchair in the lobby of a hotel in central Cape Town the surrounds do not immediately bring to mind an alternative to the high-profile investors meeting that takes place five kilometres away in the International Convention Centre. Much like the G7 summits, the Mining Indaba provoked the formation of a counter-summit.

The Alternative Indaba initiated by faith-based groups eight years ago is a forum to discuss alternatives to the mining rush that brought more doom than gloom over the African continent and beyond. Today the meeting assembles a plethora of civic organizations from around Africa trying to call for the mining industry to become more accountable to their constituents or otherwise to stop mining altogether. The meeting is a counter-summit to the Mining Indaba - the "world's largest mining investment conference, dedicated to the capitalisation and development of mining in Africa."

Large-scale mining started in Africa with the gold rush around the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg towards the end of the 19th century. Since then mining has become the centre piece of South Africa's political economy. Mining is not only contributing around six percent of the annual GDP but stimulates other economic sectors up- and downstream such as transport, energy, and manufacturing. Minister of Mineral Resources, Mosebenzi Zwane, highlighted (during the investors meeting in Cape Town) that mining in South Africa would last for another 150 years. He estimated that minerals worth \$2.5 to 3 trillion can still be mined in the country.

Resource curse or blessing?

Delegates from the Alternative summit do not necessarily believe that mining should stop overnight, but argue that extraction has not benefitted mining-affected communities around the African continent as much as it should have. Many delegates therefore speak of a resource curse in Africa, including South Africa where most of the mineral endowments are currently mined by foreign-owned companies.

International financial organizations such as the World Bank have in past years shifted their privatisation-centred discourse towards calls for good governance in the mining sector. The open society of Southern Africa speaks of two contracting economic realities on the African continent. Fostered by the World Bank, IMF and African Development Bank the first reality feeds into the "Africa rising" narrative with African countries growing their economies on their rich resource endowments. The second reality - the one that the Alternative Mining Indaba broadly purports - looks at the conundrum of Africa still being the poorest continent despite its large-scale mining activities.

At the beginning of the alternative conference, CEO of the International Council on Mining & Metal Tom Butler addressed the participants representing corporate interests and tried to persuade his audience that "there is a lot of common vision in the mining industry." Some participants applauded the fact that there was a delegate from "the other side." No minister has ever addressed the Alternative Indaba, which has long wanted more engagement with decision-makers. Just when Butler seemed to have persuaded some participants to his way of thinking a woman from the floor rose and shared her story from Marikana where in 2012 police shot 34 miners in cold blood. She accused the mining organisation operating around her home of not having built houses for which they have received funds from the World Bank. "We are still living in shacks." An embarrassed Butler responded by pointing to the failure of government to play its role. Thereafter the Indaba became a colourful exhibition of civil society organizations (some of which might proudly self-identify as uncivil society organizations.)

Taking ownership

One of the most contentious issues was the African Mining Vision which was adopted by African heads of states in 2009. David van Wyk, communist firebrand and presenter on a panel discussing the merits and shortfalls of the vision, hailed the document for not being legally binding and not challenging foreign ownership. More importantly, from a community perspective, is that the vision does not afford an explicit right for communities to say "no" to mining.

Some further confusion was caused by Paul Msoma, a technical advisor to the AU commission, who claimed that the African Mining Vision was in fact "not about mining, but about development." Christopher Rutledge from Action Aid South Africa insisted that the vision was indeed an elite-driven extraction agenda.

The meeting showed that there are multiple approaches to challenge the extractive industries that appear to fast-track mining on the backs of affected communities. Faith-based organization Bench Marks from Johannesburg has learnt that the corporate social responsibility (CSR) of mining houses amounts to "fiction" and "fake news" according to the group's director John Capel. Bench Marks is helping communities monitor the impacts of mining operations through a schooling scheme. The first-hand experience that comes out of this has been collected from Southern African community monitors and presented in book format under the title *We are Activists* at the Alternative Mining Indaba.

The closing session of the Indaba was aimed at drafting the declaration that gets habitually handed over to the conveners of the investors meeting. After a protest march that ended in front of the International Convention Centre (ICC) the declaration was amicably received by Tom Butler who joined the protesting crowd outside the premises.

While Butler was offered a podium in the midst of the Alternative Indaba, civil society activists had to hand over their memorandum out of sight of the investors, corporates and ministers inside the building the entrance to which was blocked by police and security. Butler gestured to a small delegation that he had brought along and promised to answer to the resolution before the next Indaba. "Thanks for the singing", he added.

If the Alternative Mining Indaba wants to be more than a singing side event of the investors meeting it might be better to think of a more autonomous space to work on alternatives to unleashed extractivism. Some activists were calling for moving the Alternative Indaba to those mine-affected communities and I agree, it might be the right time now for the Alternative Indaba to leave Cape Town's air-conditioned lobbies.