

COSTING THE SMOG THAT I BREATHE SELEBI-PHIKWE UNDER ATTACK BY MINING POLLUTION

OPINIONS, PROBLEMS, AND PERSPECTIVES

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The environment, atmosphere and structures of the small mining town of Selebi-Phikwe in Botswana are harshly reminiscent of colonial times. Such a scenario is hardly unique to Selebi-Phikwe but instead is a common characteristic of mining towns in Africa. In particular, the physical planning reflects an era's ethos which determined the rural and urban planning as per race and class status. Obviously, the less prominent classes in the system were designated less favourable areas – the criteria being influenced by (inter alia) factors such as altitude and wind direction. Unfortunately, the situation is still prevailing, as in the case of Selebi-Phikwe. The health and environmental impacts resulting from the copper-nickel mining activities disproportionately affect the Selebi-Phikwe community. In particular, the smog that is produced during smelter operations at the copper-nickel mine depends on unpredictable meteorological conditions such as wind direction for its destination. And these ostensibly harmless emissions of sulphur dioxide are an undeniable source of air pollution. The detrimental and deleterious effects on the community's health and environment confront even the least sensitive of tourists and investors to this area.

The smog is most apparent - a thick fog that envelopes sections of the town, depending on the wind direction. By way of historical physical planning the greater and poorer portion of the community is still resident in the high density

settlements that are located downwind. Ironically, it is the very mining venture the town relies on for its livelihood (Bamangwato Concessions Limited Mine is recognised as the Botswana's biggest employer) that could cost the community its future.

The effects of the smog on the community's health and environment are varied. They range from "an 'inconvenient' to 'serious'". Visibility is reduced by the thick smog which causes choking, coughing and watery eyes, and respiratory conditions are aggravated (people pre-disposed to asthma and other allergies suffering the most). It does not help the situation that mining towns usually have a high rate of HIV and AIDS, and subsequently a prevalence of opportunistic respiratory tract diseases such as tuberculosis. The notably high migration and large population typical of mining towns further expands the problem to other regions of the country. Investment too has been hampered as a result of the town being associated with air pollution. The challenges posed by the smog manifest both in the short and long term. That aside, numerous factors influence the impact of the smog including the quantity of the sulphur dioxide emissions, the wind speed and direction, and the general health of a person. These costs pertaining to some of the most basic of human rights (that is, health and the environment) should necessarily be viewed in the light of sustainable development.

The government owns 50% of the mining venture; the copper-nickel mine's successes have not reached the targets projected, and the mine's lifespan is much closer to the end – the situation is uneasy and urgent. Some questions become pertinent: whose responsibility is it to safeguard the health and environmental interests of the community; what is the cost to the health and environment of the community; who determines the cost; who bears such costs; and can the costs be prevented or mitigated?

What is clear though is the need for an independent probe into the health and environmental impacts of the smog. There is also need for transparency and community involvement in issues of common interest such as air quality reports. The main parties in mining towns are obviously the government, the mining company and the community (or civil society). Government has a duty to protect its citizens; the mining company has obligations and standards to meet internationally and nationally, while the local community (and or civil society) is entitled to demand the community's rights. But despite the identified concerns it is not unfamiliar to find these actors sitting on the matters hoping that the wind blows (and continues to blow) the smog in the other direction.