

Africa: Mining conflicts multiply, as critics of “extractivism” gather in Johannesburg

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The World Social Forum’s “Thematic Forum on Mining and Extractivism” convenes from 12-15 November 2018 in Johannesburg, South Africa, just after the Southern Africa People’s Tribunal on Transnational Corporations. In between, at the notorious 2012 massacre site on the platinum belt to the west, there is a launch of a new book - Business as Usual after Marikana - critical not only of the mining house Lonmin but of its international financiers and buyers.

This is the moment for a profoundly critical standpoint to take root, unhindered by ineffectual reformism associated with [Corporate Social Responsibility](#) gimmicks and the mining sector’s civilised-society watchdogging at the [mainly uncritical](#) Alternative Mining Indaba. That non-governmental organisations-dominated event occurs annually in Cape Town every February, at the same time and place where the extractive mega-corporations gather.

The Thematic Forum firmly [opposes](#) “extractivism.” [Unlike the Indaba](#), it aims to connect the dots between oppressions, defining its target as extraction of “so-called natural resources” in a way that is “devastating and degrading,” since mining exacerbates “conditions of global warming and climate injustice. It subjects local economies to a logic of accumulation that privately benefits corporations,” and represses “traditional, indigenous and peasant communities by violations of human rights, affecting in particular the lives of women and children.”

The last point is not incidental, as two of the main organisers are the [Southern Africa Rural Women’s Assembly](#) and the [WoMin](#) network: “African Women Unite Against Destructive Resource Extraction.” Inspired by Amadiba Crisis Committee activists in the Eastern Cape’s Wild Coast, they have campaigned hard for the [#Right2SayNo](#).

Last month, such rights language proved invaluable in the Constitutional Court in Johannesburg, when the Itireleng community [won](#) a [judgement](#) against displacement from their farm, under attack by a local platinum mining house. (This was pleasantly surprising to many of us who are Court critics, given how much [corporate power](#) is hardwired into South Africa’s founding document.)

On the Wild Coast last month, South Africa’s Mining Minister [Gwede Mantashe](#) had shown how desperately he wants investment by the likes of aggressive Australian titanium mining firm [MRC](#). But the [Amadiba Crisis Committee](#) and its allies have consistently shown their ability to say “No!”

No means no

The Forum’s opening morning features a demonstration at the nearby world headquarters of AngloGold Ashanti, the locally listed firm shamed in 2005 by [Human Rights Watch](#) for its alliances with warlords during the minerals-related murder of millions of people in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 2011, AngloGold Ashanti won the title “world’s most irresponsible

corporation” at the “Davos Public Eye” [ceremony](#) organised outside the World Economic Forum by Greenpeace and the Berne Declaration.

Since then the firm has attracted even more intense community, labour, feminist and environmental protests from [Chile](#) to [Colombia](#) to [Ghana](#) to [Guinea](#) to [Tanzania](#), as well as in [South Africa](#) over mass retrenchments, inadequate pay and delay of silicosis-related compensation payments. It is a sick company, with its Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) price having fallen by more than half since a mid-2016 peak (and even further from its 2006-12 JSE valuations).

[Criticised](#) by investors who believe “AngloGold has not matched up to its global peers” in large part because of less profitable South African holdings, AngloGold Ashanti is rapidly exiting its home country. The [firm](#) made its fortune during the notorious 20th century era of extreme apartheid extractivism when it was run by the Oppenheimer family. Perhaps even worse is the new boss, [Kelvin Dushnisky](#), who has presided over Toronto-based Barrick (the world’s largest gold producer, known in Africa as Acacia) during its recent reign of mining [terrorism](#), including [mass rape](#).

The mining corporations under fire at the Forum are not only the typical pinstriped, ethics-challenged cowboys from the London-Toronto-Melbourne-Johannesburg circuits. Next door in Mozambique, Rio-based Vale’s coal-mining operations at Moatize were disrupted last month, [according](#) to activist allies at the *Associação de Apoio e Assistência Jurídica às Comunidades*, due to “excessive pollution [and] acceleration of the decay of houses due to explosion of dynamites.”

Albeit trying to “mask brutal exploitation with the language of South-South solidarity,” as [documented](#) by Canadian researcher Judith Marshall, Vale is brutal in numerous jurisdictions, judged by the Berne Declaration and the Brazilian Movement of Landless Workers as the [worst company in the world](#) in 2012 due to “its labour relations, community impact and environmental record.”

In Mozambique, Vale as well as the Indian firms Coal of India, Vedanta and Jindal have been criticised for displacement and destruction. Community [protests](#) against foreign companies are prolific in coal-rich Tete Province. Further east, on the Mozambican coastline, beach sands in some communities have been destroyed by the voracious Chinese firm Haiyu. “They owe us because they have taken our beautiful sand from us and left nothing. We don’t know the quantity of the sand that they took over seven years, but we know that they profited from it and we want our dues. They have taken all the riches here and left us with nothing,” [complains](#) Nassire Omar, a local resident who can no longer carry out fishing subsistence.

But it may be that [Vedanta](#) and its boss Anil Agarwal - who is also Anglo American Corporation’s largest single investor with more than 20 percent of shares - has witnessed the most sustained protest, including a mass protest in May 2018 against the Thoothukudi Sterlite copper plant, which his officials responded to with a massacre of 13 Indians demanding an end to pollution.

Protest against Africa’s largest copper mine, Konkola, centres on [1,826 Zambian farmers](#) poisoned by Vedanta. Just before the London Stock Exchange delisting of Vedanta last month, popular reggae musician Maiko Zulu [protested](#) (and was arrested) at the British High Commission in Lusaka, demanding that authorities deny Agarwal his escape from London prior to justice being served. Agarwal [bought](#) that mine for US \$25 million in 2004 and a decade later [bragged](#) that ever since he had taken US \$500 million to \$US 1 billion home from Konkola annually.

After extractivism

These sorts of Western plus BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa] modes of super-exploitation exemplify the [mineral, oil and gas looting](#) underway across Africa. The uncompensated extraction of non-renewable resources amounts to an estimated US \$150 billion annually, far more even than the US \$50-80 billion Illicit Financial Flows and US \$50 billion in legal [profit](#) repatriation from Africa by mining and petroleum firms.

But increasingly, mining houses are pushing the people and environment too far, and resistance is rising. As Anglo American Corporation leader Mark Cutifani [remarked](#) in 2015, “There is something like US \$25 billion worth of projects tied up or stopped” by mining critics across the world.

How activists can increase that figure is the topic of next week’s discussions, along with moving from these critiques to strategies for post-extractivist systems of political economy, political ecology and social reproduction.

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