



AT A CORPORATE level, observes the writer, the mainstream mining sector has long championed the cause of sustainability. The industry, however, faces a peculiar challenge when it comes to sustainability: its assets are finite. | IVAN ALVARADO Reuters

Sustainability considerations that matter for minerals sector

Current divisions and suspicions of stakeholders are no basis on which to forge a future

SUSTAINABILITY is front-of-mind in every economic sector today, including the minerals industry. But can mining really deliver on this front – and do the stakeholders agree on what they want to achieve together?

To the first part of this question, I would suggest the jury is still out. What verdict is finally returned depends largely on the answer to the second part of the question – which I would say is still an emphatic “no”.

Most industry stakeholders – essentially companies, government, unions, communities and civil society NGOs – are deeply divided and suspicious of each other. It is no basis on which to forge a future of any sort, let alone one that is sustainable.

Definitions of sustainability are many, although there is generally consensus that it recognises the needs of tomorrow’s global population with the same importance as ours of today.

I would like to take this a step further, following Peter Frankopan’s idea in his book *The New Silk Roads*; sustainability, he says, is a shared belief that tomorrow will be better than today. This also sits well with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which it describes as “the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all”.

In the words of Mineral Resources Minister Gwede Mantashe, the state expects mining to be conducted in a way that ensures that “future generations are not worse off. Mining companies must leave a positive legacy in areas where they operate, and positively coexist with the community, environment and other economic sectors”.

At a corporate level, the mainstream mining sector has long championed the cause of sustainability. The industry, however, faces a peculiar challenge when it comes to sustainability: its assets are finite. Any discussion of sustainability, then, by necessity needs to include a post-mining stage where the mine – at one time

LOOKING AHEAD



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the driving agent in the area – will not even be present to participate, much less to drive any economic progress.

This makes it vital that efforts toward sustainability in mining are collaborative, because a key stakeholder – the mining company – will exit at some point after actual mining has ended. This will leave the other parties to practically take forward the post-mining vision.

Such collaboration between the mine and other stakeholders therefore needs to be based on a strong foundation – which includes a shared belief that is articulated and firmly held by all parties.

In South Africa today, it appears that the mining sector lacks such a shared belief – a belief that mining can indeed deliver a future that is better than today.

There will be no simple solution to find a path to this shared belief, but a start does need to be made without delay.

Below are a few of the issues that stakeholders will need to prioritise on this journey:

- ◆ Currently the legislation and regulations place requirements on individual mines with regard to their social and environmental impact. It has been shown, however, that many of the sustainability challenges are beyond the capacity of a single mine to address in any significant way. Ways must be found to co-ordinate and consolidate the actions of mining companies in

any given area – ensuring that there is a critical mass, and that the impact is optimised. Of course, this begs the question about what a single mine in a remote area – surrounded by perhaps dozens of settlements – is expected to contribute in socio-economic terms.

- ◆ The role of local government – local municipalities and district municipalities – is key in service delivery to communities. It has, however, in many cases turned out to be inadequate to this task. Not only must this capacity be rebuilt, but also the capacity to look forward beyond day-to-day responsibilities. Only then will collaborative planning with mines and other stakeholders be able to open the way towards a different and better future – focused on life after mining. This is no simple matter, especially when local government has to deal with multiple communities with a range of expectations.

- ◆ The role and potential contribution of mine-affected communities is another burning issue. While much time and effort has been spent on fostering relationships between mines and communities, there appears to remain significant distance between the parties. The ongoing dispute about mining at Xolobeni in the Eastern Cape is a stark reminder. A key factor behind this – which has not been resolved – is the way that communities represent themselves and their needs. Are the forums for communities properly representative, for instance? And are they effective in promoting the communities’ real interests? How indeed do those needs get articulated, and are they presented in a forum that has any power to resolve them? Making progress here is likely to be a prerequisite for bridging the current credibility gap between many mines and their communities.

- ◆ Trade unions have become very closely woven into the formal negotiating structures of the minerals industry, especially with the tripartite philosophy that has been applied

since 1994. However, the result has not been a close relationship; rather, there appears today as wide a trust deficit as ever. What makes the tenor of this association so crucial is labour’s ability to directly affect production and mine viability. Certainly there appears to be no shared belief in a common future – or at least none that is explicit. Difficult economic conditions have created pressures on both sides of the bargaining table. These pressures are not conducive to long-term planning for sustainability, but make it nonetheless imperative. An intensely adversarial approach seems to only foster short-termism and a polarisation of positions.

- ◆ The policies, approach and conduct of national government in this milieu takes on a particular relevance. At this level, government has the power to foster a culture of collaboration, under the more general imperative of national unity. Through the Department of Mineral Resources – but also through the myriad of government agencies related to social development – the spirit of constructive partnerships can be promoted on the ground.

- ◆ I would propose that the mining and minerals sector look to the SDGs to inspire some common ground. The goals include no poverty, no hunger, good health and well-being. They highlight quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation – as well as affordable and clean energy, decent work and economic growth. They support industry, innovation and infrastructure, while seeking reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, and responsible production.

Perhaps most importantly, the SDGs include “Partnerships for the Goals”. This is where mining stakeholders need to start, with a shared belief in tomorrow – on which partnerships can be built.

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