

Environmental justice: The PH mining industry

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Pro-environment activists hailed President Duterte's support for Environment Secretary Gina Lopez's order to close 23 mining corporations that had violated environmental laws. The basis of the DENR ruling on the closure of these 23 mining firm(out of a total of 41 firm) was that they were operating in functional watersheds. They shall not be operating unless they appeal the decision which would become final when the President says it is. Water is important, Lopez says, and the green economy can actually create more jobs.

The 23 firms include One Asia Mining and Development Corp. in Bulacan, the Benguet Corporation, the country's oldest mining company, the Benguet Corporation's Nickel Mines, Inc., the Diversified Metals Corporation in Zambales, the Eraman Minerals, three mining companies in Homonhon, six firms in Dinagat Islands, and seven other firms in Surigao del Norte. In addition, five corporations were also suspended.

Lopez blamed the previous government and the DENR for not helping the communities affected by the mining operations.

After the Surigao del Norte earthquake with a magnitude of 6.7 tremor that left 6 people dead and about a hundred injured, the President said that the mines would remain closed unless they are able to restore what they have destroyed. As expected, there was considerable protest from the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines (COMP). Department of Finance Carlos Dominguez worries over the impact of mine closure on jobs which could affect 12 million people according to the Mining Industry Coordinating Council (MICC). The Philippine mining industry says the mine closure was "illegal and unfair."

In Surigao alone, one mining corporation employs 10,000 people. The chair of COMP fears that the closure would have great impact on basic services and livelihood programs. Losses from mine closures are seen at P77 billion annually.

World nickel prices surged and doubled after the mine closures, which indicate the impact of the decision on the nickel industry. This was so because the nickel mines that were closed account for half of the world's nickel output. However, experts also note that the economy would grow even without the mining industry which today contributes less than 1% to the overall economy.

A Policy Brief entitled: "Is There a Future for Mining in the Philippines" prepared by the Ateneo School of Government in 2011 cites findings by noted economists, among others, former NEDA Secretaries Cielito Habito and Arsenio Balisacan. It states that while it is neither for nor against mining, it raises questions on critical issues such as the following: What is the nature of mining? Does it generate conflict? Does it benefit indigenous and local communities? What are the real costs and risks? What is responsible mining as applied in the country? What are the operational conditions to be met to conduct responsible mining? What are the necessary actions and measures to ensure responsible mining? What is the future of the mining industry?

It cites findings of Balisacan which showed that poverty among individuals engaged in mining continued to increase, compared to workers in other sectors, and that the mining sector showed a high deprivation in health and education compared to other industries. Other question on social costs include: "How do decision makers account for changes in a people's way of life, their health and well-being, their personal and property rights,

erosion of their cultural values brought about by the sudden wealth of individuals and communities? These are crucial questions as over half of the mining sites in the country are found in socially vulnerable areas such as Mindanao. There are security risks, and the costs of making operations secure are high. Sand mining in coastal communities has destroyed fisherfolks livelihood and marine habitats. Likewise, there are many unknown social impacts as well as risks.

It is then important to examine this current conflict by weighing the cost-benefits of the mining industry – to balance its contribution to the economy and its costs on people and the environment. Which indeed, is the essence of Environmental Justice.

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