

Human rights should be central to the extractive industry's Covid-19 recovery plans

The year 2020 has seen many sectors being confronted with unprecedented challenges that forced businesses to reflect on their corporate strategies in response to Covid-19 pandemic, which has severely affected both humans and industries. The global emergency which disrupted world economies and threw industries into major financial upheaval has also presented opportunities for corporates to affirm their commitments to human rights at a time when most are pushed to re-evaluate how they conduct their businesses.



Image source: Getty/Gallo

The extractive industry like every sector was thrown into unexpected turmoil and pushed to make drastic decisions that will have far-reaching consequences in the short and long term. These include mass layoffs, salary cuts, terminating supplies' contracts and extending shifts to increase production, factors which are already contributing to the deterioration of working conditions and lead mining companies to renege on principles of respecting the human rights of workers.

Lack of transparency

According to the [Corporate Human Rights Benchmark 2020 report](#), human rights due diligence is the one area of poor performance across all sectors, with companies in the extractive sector still failing to disclose progress in meeting the fundamental expectations of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).

The Southern Africa Resource Watch (SARW) believes that the lack of transparency has long been a blanket under which human rights abuses within the sector are covered. Our concerns lie in the fact that by not opening themselves up for constructive public scrutiny, the companies are avoiding to be held accountable for failures in upholding human rights during the global health pandemic.

Occupational health and safety

SARW agrees that difficult times of the current crisis call for difficult decisions, however, we are concerned that some decisions taken by mining companies have left the most vulnerable members of the society more exposed to the harsh impacts of the Covid-19. As most production slowed down and, in some cases, came to a complete halt, the lowest ranking employees in the mining sector found themselves at risk of losing their livelihoods. In some countries, mining activities were allowed with mining companies not bound by strict regulations to protect their employees against viral infection.

Other concerns of mining companies' indifference by obliging employees to work despite the global health emergency without safety precautions, were heard during SARW's fourth annual Alternative Mining Indaba of the Democratic Republic of Congo, last month (November 2020). Delegates raised concerns about mining companies that had locked workers under devastating and hazardous conditions in order to push production. As an important contributor to Africa's economy, the mining sector should balance addressing production challenges with promoting occupational safety and health for the workers.

While the pandemic has put a spotlight on corporate's priorities, it should be noted that for most mining companies, the goal remains to keep their profits margins to their maximum. If we believe that the Covid-19 is an equaliser that allows all of us to reflect on the contributions we are making to improving the world we live in, the extractive sector must use the crisis to revisit its commitment to upholding human rights.

Lessons from Covid-19

As most sectors are implementing recovery strategies to make up for lost revenues, SARW would like to remind the extractive sector of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which proclaims the inherent rights that every human being is entitled to on the basis of their humanity, regardless of their socio-economic status, race and gender. As we commemorate Human Rights Day, we urge the industry to respect this important proclamation.

This year's Human Rights Day theme, *Recover Better - Stand Up for Human Rights*, reminds us of the moral obligation that strong members of our society have towards protecting the most vulnerable in their midst. Lessons from the Covid-19 should be for mining companies to ensure that their recovery plans are people-centred and contribute to addressing inequalities as well as human right abuses. According to the United Nations, the day also aims to reaffirm the importance of human rights when we rebuild, the need for global solidarity as well as our interconnectedness and shared humanity. The extractive industries can play a significant role in advancing these values.

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>