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Corporate Social Responsibility in Mining in Southern Africa: Fair accountability or just greenwash?

RALPH HAMANN
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ABSTRACT *Ralph Hamann and Paul Kapelus argue that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)-related narratives and practices can be fruitfully assessed with reference to accountability and fairness as key criteria. Brief case studies of mining in South Africa and Zambia suggest that there are still important gaps between mining companies' CSR activities, on the one hand, and accountability and fairness, on the other. The conclusion is that companies' CSR-related claims, and particularly the reference to a business case for voluntary initiatives, need to be treated with caution. CSR is not necessarily or only greenwash, but there is a need to engage business critically towards more sincere versions of CSR.*

KEYWORDS *business case; fairness; labour rights, South Africa; Zambia*

Introduction

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is playing an increasingly significant role in companies' narratives and practices also in southern Africa, particularly in the case of mining. The international prominence of CSR in mining can be traced to mining's potentially significant negative social and environmental impacts, and the related criticism levied at mining companies from governments, NGOs, and local community organizations (e.g. Banerjee, 2001; Third World Network Africa, 2001; MMSD (Mining, Minerals, and Sustainable Development), 2002). CSR also plays a special role in mining because of the inherent finiteness of the resource body and the environmental and social impacts related to mine closure (Warhurst and Noronha, 2000).

In the international debates, the voluntary character of CSR is commonly emphasized. For instance, the European Commission (2001: 5) defines CSR as 'essentially a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment.' Companies are motivated towards CSR by the so-called business case for CSR. That is, company efforts at responding to stakeholders, minimizing negative impacts, and maximizing positive impacts are said to have a positive effect on profits, at least in the medium- to long-term (WBCSD (World Business Council for Sustainable Development), 2000; Holliday *et al.*, 2002). Hence, the International Council

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on Mining and Metals commits its members to seeking 'continual improvement in our performance and contribution to sustainable development so as to enhance shareholder value' (see www.icmm.com/html/icmm.principles.php). The objective of CSR is to align corporate policies and practices to sustainable development, in order to ensure companies' reputation and their access to capital, land and markets.

The initial argument of this sort was the modernization hypothesis, which argued that effective environmental management would increase the efficiency of the production process – in terms of less energy and material needs – and hence increase bottom line profits (Porter and van der Linde, 1995). However, the business case for CSR is far from clearcut. In general, empirical studies on this topic are not conclusive (Griffin and Mahon, 1997; Margolis and Walsh, 2003). Even though mining companies may face particularly strong incentives for ensuring their 'social licence to operate' (Humphreys, 2000) due to the long-term, location-specific nature of their investment, company leaders and investors are still unsure about the relationship between CSR and profits (MMSD (Mining, Minerals, and Sustainable Development) & PWC (PriceWaterhouseCoopers), 2001).

Accountability and fairness as prerequisites

Parallel to the growing CSR rhetoric, critics argue that CSR is primarily about projecting a suitable image in order to placate critics and ensure 'business as usual'. 'Labelling companies' voluntary environmental initiatives 'greenwash,' some NGOs argue, 'it is often the world's most polluting corporations that have developed the most sophisticated techniques to communicate their message of corporate environmentalism' (FoEI (Friends of the Earth International) *et al.*, 2002). A particular concern has been the emphasis on the voluntary character of companies' CSR-related initiatives. With respect to mining, Rivas-Ducca (2002: 4) complains, 'in a vacuum of effective, legally binding regulation, mining corporations simply walk away from what should be their 'corporate respon-

sibility,' their ecological and social debt to affected societies.'

A critical view of CSR emphasizes the need to consider underlying motivations for business to embrace and perpetuate the CSR concept. These may relate to accommodation – the implementation of cosmetic changes to business practice in order to preclude bigger changes – and legitimization – the influence by business over popular and policy-related discourse in order to define what questions may be asked and what answers are feasible (Hamann and Acutt, 2003: 255).

Levy (1997: 127) provides a similar analysis of environmental management on the basis of the Gramscian concept of hegemony, whereby environmental management 'can be understood as an integrated response on the practical and ideological level that serves to deflect more radical challenges to the hegemonic coalition' (for other critical analyses, see Mitchell, 1989; Driscoll and Crombie, 2001; Roberts, 2003; Rahaman *et al.*, 2004).

At a practical level, the key demand of critics of CSR is that for CSR to be anything other than greenwash, it has to guarantee that companies are accountable for the direct and indirect impacts of their activities. It is apparent that in any such assessment, the scale of analysis plays an important role. For instance, an assessment of particular CSR-related initiatives, such as support for small businesses or improved community engagement programmes, is likely to be optimistic. In particular, beneficiaries of CSR initiatives are unlikely to complain about their existence, even though issues of design may be disputed. At the level of company or country, a comprehensive assessment of the positive or negative economic, social, or environmental impacts of business activity is bound to be tentative and disputed. As noted by Bezuidenhout *et al.* (2003: 46) existing attempts at 'triple bottom-line accounting' at a national level 'are useful, but rest on wild speculation' (on this topic see also Korten, 2001).

Considering these difficulties, the following discussion will concentrate on the local level of analysis, that is, the areas and communities surrounding and more or less directly affected by mining operations. At this level, the benefits of

CSR initiatives will need to be compared to the overall social and environmental impacts of the mining project. The role of the company's CSR-related promises also needs to be considered, in that such promises may have powerful effects on local inhabitants' expectations, as well as the decision-making processes surrounding the project.

Even at the local level, however, strikingly contrasting interpretations of mining companies' social impacts are prevalent. This is also because those holding opposing interpretations of CSR are likely to apply different criteria and perceptual lenses on the assessment of outcomes of CSR-related activities. As an indication of such contrasting perceptions, compare the comment made by Anglo American's CEO, 'Johannesburg, built on the gold industry, is a shining example of sustainable development!' (Trahar, 2002), and the critical view, 'Johannesburg is perhaps the world's most unsustainable city' (Bond, 2001: xvi). In the context of such diverging approaches, a potentially important aspect of companies' CSR strategies ought to be the identification of widely respected indicators for CSR performance (Uglow, 2000; Azapagic, 2004), and the public reporting of information on these indicators (Peck and Sinding, 2003).

The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) (see www.globalreporting.org) is trying to provide the best practice framework for companies' public reports on corporate governance and economic, social, and environmental impacts. It is also developing a sector-specific set of guidelines for the mining industry, and an increasing number of mining companies are referring to the GRI guidelines also in southern Africa. However, it is apparent that companies' reports are still primarily about public relations. For instance, an overview of South African companies' public reports indicates that there is a common lack of location-specific, non-selective, and comparable data in most public reports (Hamann, 2004; Sonnenberg and Reichardt, 2004).

Furthermore, there is a crucial gap in companies' declarations that they are addressing CSR-related issues, even if they aim to show that their net social impact is positive. This gap pertains to the general absence of justice in the CSR narra-

tives. It is thus suggested that an important criterion that needs to be applied in any assessment of CSR narratives and practices, at any level of analysis, is that of social justice. As far as we know, this link still needs to be made in a comprehensive manner, but for the discussion that follows, we will apply a fairly simplistic interpretation of the fairness principle (Rawls, 1999): companies can only claim to be socially responsible if their direct, indirect, and cumulative impact on society benefits the most vulnerable and worst off.

Platinum and chrome mining in Rustenburg, South Africa

Case study research was conducted in the platinum and chrome mining area surrounding the town of Rustenburg in South Africa's North West Province. This area is part of the Bushveld Complex, which contains the world's largest reserves of platinum group metals and others, including chrome. The case study area included mines of different age and size, operated by a diverse range of South African and international companies. Owing to space constraints, particular companies will not be considered in this discussion. Instead, selected case study findings will be presented in a generic manner.

In the case study area, companies' dominant interpretation of CSR has been in terms of so-called corporate social investment: philanthropic initiatives in communities surrounding the mines or via national programmes in education, health, welfare, or small business development. Although these initiatives have represented welcome development contributions, they have had little impact on the root causes of social problems surrounding the mines. Many of these root causes relate to core business practices of the mining companies, especially employee recruitment and housing. As conceded by one business manager, 'Albeit we have the right intentions, we might not be getting at the root causes, or getting at those business activities that may be exacerbating the social problems.'

These core business practices were framed by South Africa's colonial and apartheid history, and the detrimental social impacts of migrant labour and large single-sex hostels were acknowledged

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in the 1970s already (Pallister *et al.*, 1987; Flynn, 1992). Following the transition to democracy in 1994, there have been further efforts to diminish reliance on socially disruptive business practices, especially as they contributed to the world's highest injury and death rates in mines (Commission of Inquiry into Safety and Health in the Mining Industry, 1995). Even at the local level, it has been frequently pointed out that a root cause for many of the Rustenburg area's social problems is the mining companies' continued reliance on single-sex hostels (CRC (Conflict Resolution Consortium), 2001; Plan Associates, 2001). This pertains especially to the growing informal settlements (squatter camps) around the mines, whose residents suffer deteriorating social conditions, including lacking services, crime, and disease. As argued by one mining company director:

You don't have to be a genius to see what the real threats are [in the area]: unemployment, crime, the disrupted social fabric created by the migrant system, and the fact that you have a lot of single men living in hostels in proximity to your operations.

Despite this general acknowledgement of companies' contribution to deep-seated social problems in the area, the topic of employee recruitment and housing has generally been ignored in companies' public sustainability reports. This indicates that the sustainable development discourse is also subject to accommodation and legitimization, thus giving credence to the greenwash criticism of CSR. Companies' public reports are primarily accommodating an as yet vague set of CSR-related expectations. Proactive engagement with the social challenges around mines is not yet within their ambit.

Further indication of the gap between companies' CSR-related initiatives and the root causes of social problems around the mines can be found in the relevant organizational structures. CSR-related company departments and staff have generally, until recently, had no policy influence on companies' housing practices, for instance. Furthermore, operational management has rarely had significant organizational responsibility for social issues, as indicated in the general, contin-

ued absence of social criteria in mine managers' performance assessment.

It must be noted, however, that over the last decade there has been a shift away from single-sex hostels among most companies in the case study area. There have been a variety of reasons for why such a shift was motivated by companies' enlightened self-interest, over and above continuous pressure from the state and the unions. These pertain primarily to the desire to decrease the spread of HIV/AIDS among the workforce, decrease the risk of labour unrest, increase productivity, and establish legitimacy. However, among many companies the overarching and guiding framework under which this shift has occurred is the drive to focus on companies' core competencies, according to which the labour hostels were considered a tedious and inefficient distraction.

There is no inherent problem with this motivation, except that it manifested itself without sufficient consideration to its social implications. Hence, the shift away from single-sex hostels has generally occurred separate, in terms of policy and organizational management, from companies' CSR considerations. An outcome of this has been that the shift away from hostels has further contributed to the growth of informal settlements surrounding the mines, partly because many hostel dwellers were compelled or motivated by the new policies to move into informal lodgings. This is instead of the potentially beneficial outcomes of a more considered policy on housing, within a broader, collaborative approach to dealing with informal settlements in the area.

With respect to the implicit reliance on modernization incentives as socially beneficial in the business case narrative, this suggests that such incentives can, instead, be damaging to social outcomes of business practices.

While the above has concentrated on a critique of CSR and modernization incentives in the case study area, it should be noted that the Rustenburg research has also resulted in more optimistic findings. First, the above discussion of general trends does not allow for a consideration of exceptions, whereby some companies in the area have indeed implemented CSR initiatives that are more com-

prehensive and cognisant of root causes of social problems around the mines.

Second, most case study companies are currently undergoing a potentially important transformation with regard to the definition and management of CSR. This entails a broadening of the definition of CSR to include core business practices, as well as organizational changes that see CSR-related issues considered much higher in the management hierarchy than previously the case. The key driver of this shift has been the South African state's transformation agenda, encapsulated in a scorecard that measures companies' performance against a range of so-called black economic empowerment criteria. Performance on these issues, many of which pertain to CSR, is a prerequisite for companies' access to mining licences. Contrary to the international CSR discourse, it is thus apparent that in South Africa the state has a crucial role to play in defining and motivating CSR. This state involvement shows signs of pushing CSR beyond its greenwash mould, but this cannot be taken for granted and deserves careful observation in the coming months and years.

The Copperbelt in Zambia

From the 1920s, the development of mining activity on the Zambian Copperbelt, in the north of the country, has had a fundamental impact on patterns of human activity and settlement (e.g. Richards, 1939; Ferguson, 1990). The economic opportunities in mining led to many thousands of Zambians migrating to the region. After independence, mining was nationalized and put under the management of the national parastatal Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines (ZCCM). ZCCM was responsible not only for mine management but also for service provision and basic governance roles in settlements on the Copperbelt. The communities surrounding the mines became totally dependent on ZCCM for bulk infrastructure, water and sanitation, medical facilities, education, sport and recreation.

In the mid-1990s, Zambia initiated a privatization programme under guidance and assistance from the World Bank, and this included the priva-

tization of the mines on the Copperbelt. A previous owner of mines in the area, Anglo American, became the majority shareholder in the newly created company, Konkola Copper Mines (KCM) (listed in London under Zambian Consolidated Investments), with significant investment also from the International Finance Corporation (IFC). The privatization involved significant downscaling of the labour force and increasing mechanization, which has resulted in large-scale retrenchments. This has impacted on the lives of thousands of families in both urban and rural environments, as well as on organizations involved in local government and service provision. These organizations, many of which were newly formed after the demise of ZCCM, have struggled to cope with their new duties.

In this context, KCM embarked on a prominent CSR programme. Together with national infrastructure support programmes, as well as World Bank and donor-funded projects, the company has been involved in capacity building for effective service delivery and in numerous other initiatives, including small business support (BPD–NRC (Business Partners for Development–Natural Resources Cluster), 2002). In accordance with the privatization agreement reached with the state, KCM developed social and environmental management plans, which were meant to facilitate and represent the company's CSR commitment. The social management plans were developed using the principles of the sustainable livelihood approach, emphasizing a multi-stakeholder approach to defining a development strategy for the Copperbelt communities (Scoones, 1998; with special reference to the Copperbelt, see Kapelus and Carnegie, 2001). These policies were widely commended; for instance, in 2003 KCM won the President's Special Award in recognition of its contribution to sustainable economic development. It is also noteworthy that KCM plans to publish a comprehensive report on its sustainable development performance in 2004.

However, though these CSR initiatives are commendable, they have not been able to fundamentally introduce accountability and fairness into the development process. KCM's decision-making processes have by definition been dominated by

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economic incentives. Within the broader context of the privatization process and the accompanying social costs, the CSR initiatives have played primarily an ameliorative role. Accountability and fairness have not been their primary intention, nor have they been within their power.

Ironically, this is particularly pertinent with respect to the withdrawal of Anglo American and the IFC from KCM in 2002. For example, in the late 1990s, the IFC's social policies, generally considered international best practice in this regard, insisted that two villages be relocated many years prior to the development of a new deep mine in the area. Subsequently, Anglo American and the IFC withdrew from KCM on account of the declining copper price and the resulting drop in profitability of the mines. This withdrawal has made the development of the new mine very unlikely, with the result that the resettlement was probably pointless (though the development of the new mine is not ruled out and depends on the future copper price). Even though the resettlement was undertaken with significant expense and according to high social criteria, the long-term social costs incurred by the resettlement are unaccounted for. Most especially, the fact that the life of the existing mines is limited (to about 2020) means that the villagers will be without a stable income to sustain the new villages, even though the mining company and donors have initiated development projects aimed at decreasing villagers' dependence on the mine. This example illustrates how CSR policies and practices have little sway over the fundamental business decisions based on profitability, which often have the most significant social impacts.

The criteria of accountability and fairness will need special consideration in the ongoing efforts of the mining company and donors to establish sustainable livelihoods in the area independent of mining. This is particularly because a private company is playing such a significant role in plotting the area's development trajectory. Partnerships between the company and other role-players, including local authorities, NGOs or donor agencies, have the potential to provide more effective coordination of decisions and activities, and they can also allow for greater participation

of affected communities (e.g., BPD (Business Partners for Development), 2002; for a case study of the Copperbelt in these terms, see BPD–NRC, 2002). At the same time, however, if implemented without adequate safeguards, such arrangements can also lead to a further dilution of accountability and greater confusion. In the case of the Copperbelt, the danger is that it is too remote for consistent surveillance from independent and critical organizations.

Conclusion

This short article introduced CSR as an increasingly prominent discourse also in southern Africa, particularly among mining companies. In contrast to the business case argument for CSR, critical perspectives argue that CSR is primarily about greenwash, or the projection of a caring image without significant change to socially or environmentally harmful business practices. Bearing in mind this critique, this article identified accountability – the emphasis on identifying and mitigating the impacts of core business practices – and fairness – the emphasis on helping the most vulnerable – as key criteria for any assessment of CSR policies and practices.

On the basis of brief discussions of case studies in South Africa and Zambia, it was argued that there are still important gaps between mining companies' CSR activities, on the one hand, and accountability and fairness, on the other. In South Africa, core business practices framed by the country's colonial and apartheid history have been relatively resistant to socially motivated change, despite the increasing prominence of CSR policies and reports. On the Zambian Copperbelt, CSR activities have played primarily an ameliorative role in the context of significant social disruption and uncertainty in the wake of privatization.

The conclusion is that companies' CSR-related claims, and particularly the reference to a business case for voluntary CSR, need to be treated with caution. However, CSR is not necessarily only greenwash. There are exceptions to the general trends considered above, and furthermore many of the CSR-related activities mentioned do

represent important development contributions. The article also refrains from generalizations about the role of large companies in development. Rather, it highlights accountability and fairness

as useful criteria to assess companies' CSR-related narratives and practices and the need to critically engage business towards more sincere versions of CSR.

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