SUSTAINABLE MINING

Partnership Is Key

Form partnerships and seek community acceptance, mines urged

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Forming partnerships and social acceptance by communities are the two key factors miners need to ensure to promote sustainability in the mining industry, says University of Cape Town Department of Chemical Engineering Minerals to Metals Initiative chief research officer Professor **Jennifer Broadhurst**.

Partnerships are necessary to ensure collective action and collaboration among all industry stakeholders, while mining companies, in addition to complying with their regulatory requirements, must ensure that they place maximum focus on their sustainability performance to secure a long-term social licence to operate.

Broadhurst spoke at environmental and social services provider Digby Wells Environmental's 2017 Sustainability Breakfast, held in Cape Town, last month.

The heterogeneous nature of communities is a significant challenge for mining companies, with antimining lobbyists arguing that mining companies purposefully divided communities and "corrupted" their leaders to ensure that mining projects receive local endorsement, often against the wishes of many, or the majority, of community members, she highlighted.

"This obviously impacts on mining companies that genuinely seek broad-based stakeholder engagement with regard to developing new projects."

PERCEPTION PROBLEMS
Antimining lobbyists argue that mining companies purposefully divide communities and 'corrupt' their leaders to ensure that mining projects receive local endorsement

She remarked there was that a lot of opportunity for mining houses to develop a "very strong" in-house ethos that would ensure the fostering of effective social engagement and sustainable practices "from the top down", as had already become standard practice regarding safety at mines.

Water Worries

Broadhurst noted that the issue of continuous, uninterrupted water supply to mines remained a top priority for mining firms.

Most companies remain "deeply committed" to significantly reducing their impact on water resources through decreasing water wastage and recycling water used on site, as well as by using secondary, nonpotable sources of water wherever possible, she added.

However, Broadhurst pointed out that it was also becoming increasingly evident that these measures were not enough to guarantee adequate water supply to mines and avoid conflict with local communities over water availability.

Therefore, mining companies were increasingly teaming up with external stakeholders to assist in ensuring regional water management partnerships were established, she highlighted.

Mine Discards and the Case for Regional Closure Plans

Another important issue for mine sustainability was disposing of large volumes of waste, Broadhurst said.

Although she empathised with the mining industry on the potential implications of government enforcing a 'one size fits all' approach to regulatory requirements, the continued land disposal of large quantities of mined materials as an unused resource was "really not consistent" with the modern principles of the circular economy and resource efficiency, she argued.

"I believe there are a lot of – and largely unexplored – opportunities for mining companies to be a lot more proactive in terms of making sure that their operations and processes produce bulk waste that is benign and can potentially be used for downstream applications."

Broadhurst added that these environmental issues were closely linked to mine closure or, rather, "unfortunately, the lack thereof", which was a "serious" environmental problem.

Despite her having seen several "very good mine closure plans", particularly for new

JENNIFER BROADHURST
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operations, their effective implementation still needed to be demonstrated, she said.

Broadhurst posited that there was a strong argument for the establishment of regional mine closure plans rather than individual operational closure plans. "This particularly makes sense in the mining-intensive regions of . . . Mpumalanga, the North West and Limpopo," asserted.

Filling the Trust Gap

She noted that these environmental issues related to the need to obtain and maintain the legislative and social licence to operate, which was becoming increasingly critical to the viability of operations.

She cited Africa-focused project developer Ivanplats and emerging phosphate miner Elandsfontein Exploration & Mining as having "impressive" sustainability plans in place.

Broadhurst stressed, however, that these were really "exceptional cases" and that, despite all the efforts and commitments of mining houses, the "really tragic experiences" of people in mining-affected communities were undeniable.

"What has really struck me is the general ineffectiveness of governments in dealing with legacy issues related to mining and the rising tensions between mines and local communities.

"If there is one thing that pro- and antimining lobbyists have in common, then it is their shared lack of trust in government to address their concerns. This issue must be addressed if the trust deficit is to be overcome," Broadhurst concluded.

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