

## SOUP AND SUBSTANCE



At the first meeting of Soup and Substance Betty Lacey and Mary Purcell from MIA Global Action spoke about the two issues:-

Why is MIA working on the issue of the Extractive Industries?

What are Mercy Sisters doing on the issue of Mining?

Mary spoke about the Vision of Mercy Global Action

- To act in solidarity with one another to identify and address global poverty.
- Our Justice work is grounded in the Gospel, our unfolding Mercy story, our interdependence with all creation, and our fundamental option for women and those who are economically poor and vulnerable.
- It entails restoring right relationships with God, people and Earth and working in collaboration with others for systemic change.

The issue of mining responds to these three challenges.

When MIA consulted with its members and prioritised Cosmology and Eco Justice as areas of key concern they then gathered stories from Mercy sisters working at grassroots. They identified that Mercy Sisters were working on the issue of mining in twelve countries as well as through **Mercy Investment Services**. ([link](#))

Theological Reflection was undertaken on the issue and biblical references were identified to ground the work on mining.

### ***Earth as part of the covenant relationship with God***

- *God said: "This is the sign of the covenant I will make between me and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations. I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Genesis 9, 12-13)*

### ***Persons as responsible for Earth wellbeing***

- *Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to serve and preserve it (Genesis 2, 15 in the translation by Norman Habel)*

Pope Benedict XVI:

***Obedience to the voice of Earth***

- *Obedience to the voice of the earth, of being, is more important for our future happiness than the voices of the moment, the desires of the moment. ... being itself, our earth, speaks to us and we must listen if we want to survive and to decipher this message of the earth."*

The problems associated with mining and the fact that it had greatest effect on poor and marginalised communities were reasons why Mercies around the world were working on this issue.

Problems identified included

- Violation of the Earth
- Depletion and Contamination of drinking water
- Health effects on local communities
- Human rights abuses and forced removal of populations in areas of mining
- Unsustainable short term economic benefits for a few

Activities of Mercy International Association on Mining

- Education international and national level
- National advocacy – Ireland we are making a submission to the Environmental Protection Agency on our concerns on fracking
- Developed a policy submission for the UN Council on Social Development on the issue of mining
- Research – to strengthen our policy/advocacy



Betty began her presentation by explaining the piece of research she was working on. This research aims to get a grassroots vision of how Mercy is engaging with and working with communities affected by negative effects of mining. This is done through case studies from some of the countries where Mercy are working on mining issues. These countries include:

- Argentina
- Australia
- Canada
- Honduras
- Ireland
- New Zealand
- Newfoundland
- Panama
- Papua New Guinea
- Peru

- The Philippines
- United States

As the research is a work in progress and due to time constraints limiting the presentation, she chose four countries with differing geographical locations and political regimes. For this purpose, the following countries were used for analysis;

- Argentina
- Australia
- Canada
- Peru

**Argentina** has had a history of working with traditional mining practices, but this has changed over the years and the “mega mining” has now entered the public consciousness in a big way. This is a result of an aggressive strategy to open the sector to foreign direct investment in 1992. This liberalisation of the economy led to a tremendous expansion of the mining industry as did the generous tax benefits offered by the Argentine government. Trade agreements were signed with China in 2002 which resulted in a \$20 billion investment and an exponential increase in Argentine mining.

Mercy sisters work in the Rio Negro province in Argentina where communities face the following problems

1. Health – storage of iron ore toxic waste, in vast open pits. Rio Negro is a very windy area and the transmission of these airborne chemicals leads to respiratory problems, cancer, skin diseases and allergies.
2. Use of Cyanide in mining – law passed in December 2011 allowing use of chemicals, including cyanide in mineral processing. The effects of inhaling or ingesting cyanide, or contact with the skin and eyes are immediate and can be potentially fatal. Cyanide exposure requires an emergency response as it inhibits an ability to utilise oxygen, hence the need for immediate action.
3. Local Economy – does not benefit as employment is usually on a short term basis and applies only to unskilled workers in the setting up of the project. Highly paid technicians are hired from abroad.
4. Participation – Local communities are not informed on the projects

### **Australia**

Mining in Australia has spiralled in the last ten years with enormous increases in iron ore and coal, the bulk of which is exported to China, South Korea and Japan. In 2011, iron ore and coal represented 42% of Australia’s total exports. This trade with Asia has seen ships queue for weeks outside the port of Newcastle, to carry coal across the Great Barrier Reef to China. UNESCO says that the Barrier Reef is a great risk.

These new export markets could double coal exports and several mines of monumental scale have proposed and some have been approved by the Australian government. These include:

1. Alpha Coal Project – Approved by the Federal and Queensland governments. Project includes 495km rail line.
2. Galilee Basin - Central Queensland – Plans to build nine mega coal mines, five of which would be larger than any existing coal mine. If the nine mines proceed as planned, emissions from burning the coal would be about 700 million tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) every year, making it the seventh largest emitter of CO<sub>2</sub> globally.
3. China First Mine – Proposed – Would result in the destruction of the Bimblebox Nature Reserve.

Coal Seam Gas Mining (CSG) is widely used in Australia to extract methane, which is extracted by drilling down to the coal seam. In Queensland, the average well depth is 600 metres and the drilling may pass through the aquifers used for drinking water and irrigation. Mercy sisters are working in Queensland and Victoria to raise awareness on issues of CSG and keep that awareness growing.

## **Peru**

The Peruvian government opened its doors to foreign investment in 1990, attracting investors from all over the world and contributed to the phenomenal growth in the Peruvian mining industry. Peru is now the world's second-biggest producer of copper and the sixth biggest producer of gold. Since 2006, Peru has signed trade deals with the USA, Canada, Singapore, China, Korea, Mexico and Japan.

The *Conga* Project in Northern Peru has been the centre of a bitter struggle local communities and Newmont mining since 1993. Located in Cajamarca, Northern Peru, at an altitude of 3,700 metres, it is one of Peru's most fragile ecosystems. The Conga project involves moving from four lakes high in the mountains and building reservoirs to cater for the water needs of the mining project.

Mercy Sisters have been working with local communities

- on issues of air quality and water scarcities.
- Training leaders in rights and law
- Supporting local groups in lobbying
- Raising consciousness on issues of mining
- Supporting them in all areas of human rights abuse

## **Canada & Newfoundland**

Mining and exploration companies based in Canada account for 43% of global exploration and Canadian mining interests in countries around the world are valued at tens of billions of dollars. The domestic industry is also home to the Tar Sands in Alberta, Canada.

- Alberta's tar sands are home to 173 billion barrels of recoverable bitumen, a tar-like substance that requires intensive processing.
- Three times more greenhouse gases are produced to process bitumen than conventional oil
- For open pit mines in the tar sands to produce one barrel of oil, four tons of material is dug up. Large tracts of boreal forest are also being ripped up
- Despite assurances, "land reclamation" – attempts to replace the torn-up earth – has seen very little progress. (Council of Canadians).

Tailings are the materials left over after the process of separating the valuable fraction from the uneconomic fraction.

- Mining companies dump more than 180 million tonnes of hazardous mine waste each year into rivers, lakes, and oceans worldwide.
- Mine processing waste (Tailings) can contain as many as three dozen dangerous chemicals, including arsenic, lead, mercury and cyanide.
- Tailings should be sent by pipeline for disposal, but dumping waste in oceans, river and lakes is a cheap but ecologically destructive method of disposal.

Newfoundland's Sandy Pond was set to become a toxic dump site for Brazilian mining company *Vale Inco*. The processing plant being built near Long Harbour, at Placentia Bay, is expected to process nickel from Voisey's Bay and dump approximately 400,000 ton of tailings annually in nearby Sandy Pond, a 38-hectare freshwater lake. The Canadian government gave permission to use Canadian freshwater lakes and ponds as "tailings impoundment areas" for toxic waste and the mine tailings that *Vale Inco* plans to dump into the lake will destroy the lake, causing irreversible damage. The Sandy Pond Alliance was formed to save the lake; and Sisters of Mercy at the Mercy Centre for Ecology and Justice in St. John's Newfoundland serve on its board.

Their work includes

- Setting up of local groups in a legal bid against the government to save Sandy pond.
- Engaging with media (radio interviews) to educate others on issues surrounding Sandy Pond.