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SUGAR COATING, OR THE MANUFACTURE OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT

A case study from Ghana

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This article examines how the International Finance Corporation and Newmont Mining Corporation have used participatory engagement in practice in the first phase of the Ahafo Gold Mine Project in Ghana, and whether the participatory language they employ is reflective of a genuine effort to foster community participation and development in the impoverished region.

INTRODUCTION

Participatory approaches are integral to communication for social change, and research shows a correlation between community participation and better development outcomes (Calabrese, 2008).

This article is based on a desk study of the Ahafo South Gold Mine Project in Ghana, drawing on thousands of pages of International Finance Corporation (IFC) and Newmont Mining Corporation (Newmont) project documents, as well as various studies by NGOs, media reports, and scholarly literature about community participation, consultation and development communication.

Findings indicate that while IFC and Newmont have professed a strong commitment to community involvement in the Ahafo South project, there has often been a lack of genuine two-way communication and grassroots participation in practice, with project affected people effectively prevented from substantively participating in the decision-making process. The actual participatory process at Ahafo South has been more akin to a top-down public relations campaign shrouded in participatory rhetoric. The lack of meaningful community consultation and participation have contributed to ineffective community development projects at Ahafo, leaving many people in the area worse off than they were before the mine's arrival.

THE AHAFO MINE AND IFC

Participation is meaningful only to the extent that one has the power to affect the outcome of the development process (McFarlane, 2000).

The Ahafo Gold Mine Project in Ghana was first formalized in December 2003 between the Ghanaian Government and Newmont, one of the world's largest and most profitable mining companies. The gold mine, located within the Brong Ahafo region of western Ghana, is currently producing approximately half a million ounces of gold a year (Directory of National Extractive Industry).

Before the project commenced, IFC, the private sector lending arm of the World Bank, was approached by Newmont to provide a USD 125 million loan package –a USD 75 million loan and an additional USD 50 million in syndicated loans– in support of the USD 475 million project (International Finance Corporation, August 2005). In July 2006, after mine construction and the resettlement of affected communities had already commenced, IFC loaned Newmont the funds. At that time, IFC estimated that approximately 9,500 people, most of them economically impoverished, would be directly affected by the mine's construction, primarily due to the loss of their homes or farmland.

IFC's mission is to promote sustainable private sector investment in developing countries, "helping to reduce poverty and improve people's lives." (International Finance Corporation, 2006). Despite this mandate and the fact that studies by the World Bank, Newmont and independent researchers confirm that the costs of mining to local communities often exceed the benefits the communities receive (Mathrani, 2003; Newmont, August 2005a; Sachs & Warner, 2001), IFC chose to support the Ahafo project.

Consistent with the growing trend in the international development community towards embracing participatory approaches and two-way communication in development projects, IFC policies require early and ongoing community engagement during project development, and throughout a project's lifecycle. Under IFC's Environmental and Social Review Procedures, before commencing with a project IFC must "assure itself that the client's community engagement is one that involves free, prior, and informed consultation and enables the informed participation of the affected communities, leading to broad community support for the project within the affected communities" (International Finance Corporation, 2006). Under IFC standards, 'informed participation' involves consultation, which should lead "to the client's incorporating into their decision-making process the views of the affected communities on matters that affect them directly" (International Finance Corporation, 2009).

On paper, IFC policies seem to be aligned with participatory communication models derived from Paulo Freire's work, models that emphasize the importance of interpersonal communication channels in the community-level decision-making processes (Waisbord, 2000). As Mefalopulos notes, however, 'participation' as a development approach is often used in ambiguous and inconsistent ways, with participatory terminology often employed in contexts that are not genuinely participatory (Mefalopulos, 2005). Participatory rhetoric can be used as a 'sugar coating' to facilitate individual and community acceptance of projects whose parameters have already been decided upon well in advance. Given some of the problems that have arisen at Ahafo, the extent of IFC's commitment to true community participation is of particular consequence.

MINING'S IMPACTS ON COMMUNITIES IN BRONG AHAFO

The Ahafo gold mine's impact on local communities has been profound. Independent assessors report that "these [project affected] people appear to be made vulnerable by the displacement process, whereas they were in a stable situation before and could cater for their needs." (Independent Monitoring, August 2005). Landlessness is one of the most pressing problems at Ahafo South (FIAN Germany, 2009), with the lack of replacement farmland exacerbating poverty in the area. Alternative livelihood activities suggested by Newmont, like soap-making and snail-raising, have proved to be inappropriate and inadequate substitutes for farming (see www.bicusa.org/en/Project.Concerns.23.aspx; Newmont Ghana Gold, August 2008). Food prices have also risen in project-affected areas due to the presence of Newmont's mine (Boateng, 2005), accompanied by a decline in free water supply.

In the face of this range of mine-related challenges, community engagement, participation and dialogue could play an important role in enhancing local development projects in Ahafo, and mitigating the project's negative impacts.

OVERVIEW OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AT AHAFO

They just really didn't understand the complexity of it (Interview with John Middleton, IFC, 2009)

To spearhead its community engagement efforts, Newmont hired Friends of the Earth Ghana, an environmental membership organization, and a United States-based nonprofit, Opportunities Industrialization Centers International (OICI), to conduct consultation activities at Ahafo (Newmont, April 2006). Newmont also hired its own communications team, with various units tasked with counteracting possible negative messages, providing regular interaction through community liaison officers, and supporting mitigation programs (Newmont Ghana Gold, February/March 2008).

Most initial outreach activities revolved around making printed information materials available at a limited number of fixed sites (including five information centers opened two days a week), and local radio announcements and website posting (Newmont, January 2006; Newmont, April 2006). These top-down, one-way communication activities almost exclusively focused on the diffusion of company-generated information –with scant opportunity for significant community participation or dialogue.

Since approximately half of all local residents in the Ahafo area are illiterate (Newmont, August 2005b), Newmont utilized community announcement systems, traditional town criers, local theater, puppetry, dance, drama and radio for its information dissemination efforts – activities to help ensure lower-literacy audiences could "understand and participate in discourse about project related activities" (Newmont, January 2006; August 2005b). While these activities undoubtedly helped project-affected persons receive information from Newmont about the mine project, the activities were not structured to facilitate dialogue or any form of substantive community feedback about the project.

Newmont did also conduct information sessions via community meetings, traditional councils and district assemblies (Newmont, April 2006). At the meetings, Newmont officials or their designated representatives would inform attendees about the existence of project documents, provide an overview of their content, explain means of accessing the documents, and then take questions from attendees (Newmont, January 2006). These meetings did allow for more interactive discussions. However, neither Newmont nor the IFC have explained exactly what mechanisms, if any, were in place to ensure that concerns raised by community members at these meetings could actually influence the project planning process in a meaningful way.

Newmont admits that it was in a hurry to break ground on the project, and has acknowledged accelerating the public consultation process from March 2003 onwards, before operations commenced in April 2004 (Newmont, August 2005c). Following the commencement of operations, there were numerous concerns about the project voiced by affected community members during subsequent Newmont-sponsored public consultation meetings, including:

- failure to adequately compensate for lost homes and cropland,
- inadequate access to replacement farmland,
- limited employment opportunities,
- opaque procedures for determining employment selection,
- lack of other livelihood opportunities,
- lack of clean water access,
- inadequate replacement homes,
- the excessive use of for by police and military personnel in response to community protests,
- the arrest of NGO representatives (Yamfo community, 2006),
- human waste discharge into Asuopre Stream, a tributary of the Tano River (Kenyase, 2005),
- the drowning of two people in the mine’s water storage facility,
- an increase in mosquitoes and malaria due to the damming of the Subri Stream,
- and inadequate community representation in dealings with Newmont (Newmont, January 2006 and March 2009a).

The core, underlying problem has not been the communities' refraining from sharing their views when given the opportunity –they have voiced their concerns quite convincingly– but rather Newmont and IFC failing to listen and meaningfully respond to these concerns.

METHODOLOGY

Research for this article commenced with a review of the vast quantity of publicly available IFC and Newmont documents about the Ahafo project. In tandem with the review, various studies on the Ahafo project by Food

First Information and Action Network (FIAN), the Bank Information Center (BIC), Wassa Association of Communities Affected by Mining (WACAM), and other civil society organizations and NGOs were consulted, as well as media reports about the Ahafo mine project, and scholarly literature about community participation, consultation and development communication.

Since the vast majority of interview requests submitted to Newmont, IFC and various NGO representatives were either ignored or declined in the course of the study, this article relies heavily on existing research about the Ahafo project, most of it produced by organizations with strong preexisting views about the mine.

ANALYSIS

Degree of participation

Various scholars describe different spectrums of participatory practice. Arnstein's "ladder of citizen participation" consists of three main levels: non-participation, token participation, and participation (Whiteman & Mamen, 2002). Building on Arnstein's work, Stewart Carter suggests four main categories of participation, in ascending order, from information-transfer, consultation, and collaboration, up to local control (Whiteman & Mamen, 2002).

By either of these measures, community outreach and engagement activities under the Ahafo mine project reside at the lower, less participatory, end of the spectrum. While the activities are strong on information transfer, and do have some consultative mechanisms, such as community meetings, there is no clear-cut means of ensuring communities can influence the decision making process or otherwise ensure their inputs are utilized.

Newmont claims each stakeholder contribution "will be responded to ...to indicate how the issues will be considered in the ...process, or resolved through other means" (see www.newmontghana.com). However, IFC and Newmont offer no evidence that there has actually been a substantive consideration of mine-affected communities' viewpoints in practice. By failing to provide clear feedback on how community inputs have been utilized, they have failed to even meet the minimal threshold for substantive consultation, rendering community engagement at Ahafo more akin to information-transfer –the lowest among Carter's participatory categories.

Participation and power

> It can be argued that in any case where consultation and negotiations do not explicitly provide the right of refusal by affected communities, communication is therapeutic rather than genuinely participatory (Hipwell, Mamen, Weitzner & Whiteman, 2002)

Participation is only effective when people are involved in making decisions about a project, and are treated as full partners in a project, not merely as an audience to be mobilized or to receive information (Bessette, 2001). Free, prior, and informed consent gives people potential veto power in consultations and decisions about projects that affect them. (Lavina, 2005). Participation without the power to say no, however, is meaningless.

Although there have been numerous information and dissemination activities, community meetings and other engagement activities arranged by Newmont, ever since the inception of the Ahafo project, mine-affected communities have had no right to say ‘no’, no right to refuse the conditions of resettlement, and no right to send Newmont and IFC back to the drawing board when they have found proposed livelihood programs inadequate. People have therein been disempowered –deprived of a chance to meaningfully participate in the decision-making process, which is vital for achieving meaningful poverty alleviation (The World Bank, 2003).

Consultation vs. participation

The large quantity of information dissemination activities supported by Newmont from the outset of mine operations has succeeded in informing most mine-affected persons about the displacement and compensation process (Independent Monitoring, August 2005). However, mine-affected people and communities have never had a level playing field from which they can effectively advocate for their needs.

While free, prior and informed consent is increasingly recognized as the gold standard by international development agencies, the IFC and World Bank Group have opted for the less vigorous “consultation” standard for their projects (Whiteman & Mamen, 2002; Tamang, 2005). Choosing "consultation" rather than “consent” has profound consequences for the rights of affected communities (Satterthwaite & Hurwitz, 2005).

Invoking the IFC’s use of the term, Newmont states that consultation “implies a lesser public impact on decision-making, problem solving or planning than other forms of public participation” (Newmont, November 2006b). In other words, consultation does not give rise to communities offering inputs that can tangibly influence the course of a project. It seemingly precludes two-way communication and dialogue, which are central to the process of social change under Freire’s approach (Melkote & Steeves, 2001, p.339). This, of course, begs the question: if participation and two-way dialogue are not central to Newmont and IFC’s communication activities, what is the purpose of public engagement at Ahafo South?

Public relations or participation?

> Newmont told us a lot of good stories. But we’ve seen that they’ve really disappointed us. Since we came to this settlement, most of us are not working—even the youth. Even the water we have to pay for. It is difficult to feed our families (Kojo Zica, Ntotroso Resettlement Village Resident, in Perera, 2008)

In an interview with John Middleton of IFC, he noted that Newmont “had a large team on the ground, managing community expectations, managing fears and concerns, and so on, with their consultants. And IFC played a large part in all of these things.” (Interview with John Middleton, IFC, 2009). According to Newmont, “key aspects of the consultation and disclosure process” include the “delivery of clear, consistent messages from key staff to stakeholders and the public” (Newmont, August 2005b).

This approach is more akin to a public relations exercise, where project affected persons are framed as vessels for receiving influential messages generated by Newmont –not partners. While Newmont has done an impressive job documenting the large number of meetings it has held, what is not documented at all is the impact and utility of these meetings, if any. The primary focus of Newmont and IFC seems to be on perceptions management rather than true consultation or participation. Participatory language has been used cosmetically, without any underlying substance.

Representation

From the outset of the mine project, Newmont itself established various community-level committees to putatively voice community concerns and ensure communities’ participation in important matters, such as resettlement (Newmont, August 2005c). Newmont fashioned the structure of the committees, in terms of determining what community-level groups (such as chiefs, landlords, and farmers) would have members sitting on a committee (Newmont, January 2006). These committees have played an important role, setting the parameters for a full range of benefits for project-affected people (Newmont, August 2005c). Yet, many members of key committees are not part of mine affected population groups, and instead often have vested economic interests that directly conflict with the interests of these communities (Newmont, August 2005c).

Engaging select groups to serve as community representatives may not accurately reflect the true views of the broader community (Botes & van Rensburg, 2000). According to the World Bank itself, participant selection within the stakeholder identification process is best done by the stakeholder groups themselves (Whiteman & Mamen, 2002). By selecting who they would negotiate with –by influencing the choice of the communities' representatives, rather than letting the communities decide for themselves who would represent them– Newmont diluted the development assistance process, from inception to implementation. Rather than embracing community inputs to build a better, and more meaningful program, it took deliberate steps to predetermine the outcomes of engagement activities.

Co-opting discourse – manufacturing consent

The presence of participatory language in development institutions' programs and strategies does not always lead to true dialogue, and does not necessarily reflect a genuine commitment to community empowerment (Waisbord, 2005; Obregon & Mosquera, 2005). Public participation programs are normally devised based on the specific objectives of the decision-makers, and manufacturing compliance is often the motivating force (Evans, 2002). With corporate guidance of the participatory process, there is always a particularly acute danger that community input can be co-opted, rather than afforded independent vitality (Head, 2007; Botes & van Rensburg, 2000).

The World Bank is cognizant of the fact that even in projects with high putative levels of participation, this process can be manipulated. Outsider agendas are often expressed as local knowledge, and facilitators can influence and direct 'participatory' processes in ways that comport with predetermined objectives (Mansuri & Rao, 2003). Participation can essentially be used to legitimize a project's own priorities, and "[s]ince it has little real support from either the community or the project staff, the operational demands of the project eventually take over and its participatory objectives and goals are sidelined" (Mansuri & Rao, 2003). Morgan argues that by broadly defining stakeholders –thereby diluting the voice of the poor– and employing the less vigorous 'consultation' standard, the World Bank "co-opts the concept of 'participation', using it to put a rosy face on business as usual" (Morgan, 2001).

This certainly seems to be the case with the Ahafo gold mine project. Whether the project would go forward was never in question, and never an item for discussion or debate with affected communities. Moreover, IFC and Newmont provided scant opportunity for communities to offer inputs that might meaningfully affect, and improve upon, the program as planned. Significant pressure has even been applied at times to ensure formal community acquiescence is attained. As Gladys Amankwaa, a cocoa farmer in Mahame village, has observed, "the company found people and pushed them to say they wanted mining here, and used them to prove the community approved" (Hurfstader, 2008).

There are myriad examples of Newmont taking unilateral action, under the guise of representative committees, to control the direction and tenor of discourse, including:

- conducting surveys of affected farms for the purpose of compensation without the presence and input of the affected farmers (Food First, 2005);
- determining crop compensation rates without the participation of affected farmers (Food First, 2005);
- developing a land replacement action plan without input from affected communities (Letter to the International Finance Corporation, February 2006); and
- stablishing relocation compensation rates before substantively consulting with affected communities (Newmont, August 2005c).

Although Newmont was willing to share large amounts of information about the project and conduct dozens of meetings, almost all of these activities were passive, one-way information dissemination – not participatory. Mosse notes that in some projects, publicized records of village meetings, attendance, trainings and the like are used to provide unassailable quantitative records of the project's participatory performance, which can allow a project to authoritatively claim success without any field-level verification (Mosse, 2003). This has seemingly happened at Ahafo South. The IFC and Newmont's strong public emphasis on the extensive quantity of communications activities they have supported stands in stark contrast to the project's lack of genuine grassroots participation – as well as Newmont's failure to respond substantively to community concerns. While consultative and participatory language has been employed by IFC and Newmont to legitimize the project, there has been almost no meaningful participation to add substance to these words. The voice of mine-affected persons and communities in the Ahafo region has effectively been co-opted.

The illusory standard of broad community support

On paper, IFC is required to verify that "broad community support" exists for a project within affected communities before the project can be approved. (International Finance Corporation, 2006, p.4). In written correspondence with IFC's chief of public affairs, Aaron Rosenberg, I requested clarification as to how IFC determines that broad community support exists. While Mr. Rosenberg did respond to my letter, he simply stated that, "consistent with the Disclosure Policy, however, IFC does not disclose other project specific information provided by its clients nor does it disclose information about its internal deliberative processes, so I'm afraid we will not be able to supply you with the information you requested regarding our determination of BCS [broad community support]" (Letter from Aaron Rosenberg, 2009). He only explained, per IFC's governing policies, that the IFC "reviews the client's documentation of this [consultation and informed participation] process along with other information and assures itself that broad community support exists for the project before it is presented to IFC's Board of Directors for approval" (ibid, 2009).

With IFC refusing to divulge how it confirms that broad community support exists, it is impossible to verify whether its claims that such support for the Ahafo mine project did exist are accurate. There is documentation, provided above, that many community members were concerned about and did not support the project. Moreover, IFC's documented evidence of alleged support – such as speeches by youth association members, associations and villages – often consisted of the exact same cut-and-paste boilerplate:

We the people of ________ have democratically elected ___ people to represent us on Newmont's Crop Rate Review Committee (Newmont. Attachment 3, 2005)

This is less than compelling evidence of genuine and broad-based community support. Also of note is a glaring omission: Newmont's evidence of support contains next to no documented statements of broad community support attributable to ordinary, individual project-affected community members themselves.

As noted by Besette, mobilizing people in support of actions they have not chosen and do not desire is not participation. (Besette, 2004). The lack of documented evidence of support, in tandem with the participatory void at Ahafo South, raises concerns that in their rush to build community support for corporate operations and begin selling gold, IFC and Newmont bulldozed community interests.

The limits of 'fast-tracked' participation

IFC Performance Standard 1 requires prior informed consultation – a process that takes place before a project commences (Newmont, 2006b). Other IFC policies similarly note that "[c]onsultation with affected communities must be sufficiently early in the project planning process ... for the consultation to have a meaningful influence on the broad project design options ... (as well as) the sharing of development benefits and opportunities, and project implementation" (International Finance Corporation, 2009).

Newmont acknowledges that during Stage 1 of the Ahafo project, its consultative process was too narrow, and too rushed (Newmont, October 2007). According to its own assessment, the time it allowed for consultation prior to the commencement of Stage 1 operations "was insufficient for properly sequenced and coordinated communication" (Newmont, November 2006b). Furthermore, Newmont concedes that "in terms of resettlement, insufficient time was available for proper preparation, and all impacts were not initially anticipated or mitigated" (Newmont, November 2006b). Newmont fast-tracked the resettlement schedule in order to "keep up with other aspects of project development", leading to a situation where people were relocated before their replacement homes were built, and before farming families' sustainable access to alternative agricultural land was secured (Newmont, March 2009a). Newmont's haste to realize returns on its investment was given precedence over the interests and well being of project-affected people.

While Newmont has repeatedly apologized to stakeholders, both at subsequent meetings and in writing, that there was inadequate consultation during the development of the Stage 1 project "due to the great time pressure which the operation experienced" (Newmont, October 2007), the fact that it has done little to rectify the problems resulting from the admittedly inadequate consultation and participation process renders its apologies hollow.

CONCLUSION

Newmont defines 'sustainable development' projects as those that are based on actual community needs, serve the majority of the people, are owned by the majority of the people, and are well planed, with long term benefits (Agreement between Newmont Ahafo, 2008). By failing to allow project affected people to participate in the decision-making process about the development components of the Ahafo mine project, and by failing, to date, to ensure these people are assured of significant long term benefits from the mine, Newmont has, by its own definition, also failed to ensure that there is sustainable development for communities in the area.

IFC shares responsibility for the project's failure to improve the lives of mine-affected communities –a failure that also brings the IFC in violation of its own mandate (International Finance Corporation, 2006). By depriving project-affected families of the opportunity to share their views and have them incorporated in the decision-making process before mine operations commenced, and by denying them the chance to participate meaningfully in the planning process and to have potential negative impacts mitigated to their satisfaction, IFC also violated its own directives, performance standards and guidelines (Newmont, November 2006b and February 2009a). Despite these violations, and with the seeming acquiescence of the Ghanaian Government, neither Newmont nor IFC have been held accountable to mine-affected communities for these breaches, and the very real and negative impact they have wrought.

Asked what he would change about Newmont's community engagement if given the chance, Joseph Danso, Community Liaison Officer for Newmont Ahafo Project, said he would: "[S]tructure community engagement based on Participatory Learning and Action methodology (Participatory Rural Appraisal). This is a working process and capitalizes on understanding issues, discussing issues with community members, brainstorming together to provide input then finally draw action plan to resolve community issues. This cannot be done or achieved in general meetings but through focused / separate group meetings to encourage participation and community ownership" (Newmont, November 2006a).

Mr. Danso further added that he would "recommend that [Newmont] proactively engage the communities; meaning that we engage them when they are free to talk and not when they are aggrieved and have raised issues [or] concerns" (Newmont, November 2006a).

As early as 2005, independent assessors were also recommending that Newmont more actively involve communities in developing core components of community development programs (Independent Monitoring, August 2005). They specifically noted that the company needed better strategies for consulting communities on a range of issues (Independent Monitoring, December 2005). Over the ensuring years, independent assessors reiterated their recommendation that Newmont more directly engage and negotiate with project-affected persons about the development of programs and the delivery of benefits (Newmont Ghana Gold, August 2008; Independent Monitoring, December 2005).

Newmont and IFC need only have followed the advice of their own staff, program assessors and studies in order to make community engagement at Ahafo truly meaningful and effective – instead of utilizing participatory language to sugar-coat a predetermined and destructive course of action. By shifting the focus of community engagement efforts from obtaining community acquiescence to the project to true community engagement, Newmont and IFC could have still attained their bottom-line goals while also improving families' lives. Regrettably, the point is now moot.

Given the lessons of Ahafo, the IFC should either consider adopting more robust standards on community participation –backed by stringent enforcement and accountability mechanisms– to ensure that there is true community involvement in projects that it funds, or conversely, it should consider bringing its words into closer alignment with its current practices by adopting new standards that do not explicitly profess to meaningfully engage communities in the development process. As things stand, IFC's words insufficiently correspond with its actions.

This article is based on the author's Master thesis in Communication for Development, Malmö University, Sweden.

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