



AGHAM

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Case Study: Scientist-community partnership for environmental justice and corporate accountability – the Philippine experience

Introduction:

Development aggression projects have been dominating the rural areas in the Philippines such as extracting large-scale mining projects, vast monocrop plantations, and reclamation, which have deleterious effects to the environment and the communities living adjacent to or within the project areas. In many cases, these communities are denied of basic information relating to such threatening impacts. These types of projects are one of the advocacies of AGHAM by bringing science and technology to the majority of the Filipino people. One particular experience is the Environmental Investigation Mission (EIM) conducted by AGHAM and various people's organizations on the breach in one of mine tailings storage facility owned by Philex Mining Corp.'s in August of 2012 in Benguet province. This is considered to be the worst case of mining disaster in the country that destroyed a major river system, the Balog River being used by the community for their livelihood.

EIM is an iterative, participatory and scientific process of investigation, engaging a multi-disciplinary team to integrate the knowledge of the local communities with the quantifying expertise of the scientists and technologists. It covers biophysical, social, political, and economic impact of the project to the people

Purpose/Expectations:

The EIM aims to assess the immediate impacts of the Tailings Storage Facility 3 (TP3) breach to the river ecosystems as well as to the immediate communities by convening an assemblage of technical experts from different fields, community members, NGO workers, members of the church, environmental advocates and people's organization members that will look into the environmental and socioeconomic impacts of the said incident.

Implementation (duration, structure, partner(s)/stakeholders, financial considerations, monitoring progress):

Following a request from community organizations, AGHAM, along with several partner organizations, convened a team for the preparation of the EIM activity. **A total of 8 formal organizations** collaborated in this endeavor at varying degrees of involvement. The preparation took one and half months that involved series of consultation with the community and partner organizations, preparation of logistics for the field testing and the conduct of the community interview.

On October 2012, a multi-disciplinary team was deployed to the affected site of the tailings pond contamination. The team was composed of two groups; one group conducted the biological and the physicochemical assessment of the identified impact areas. The other group facilitated the focus group discussions and key informant interviews to document the effects of the TSF3 incident to the health and source of livelihood of the residents which is fishing. Due to the urgency of the incident, the financial requirement was shouldered by the the partner organizations such as the church people and the environmental group for the laboratory testing of water and sediment samples.

Outcomes and Impacts:

The investigation revealed severe environmental pollution of the river systems based on the result of laboratory tests, the prevalence of various illnesses that is highly probable to be attributed to the incident, adverse effects on the livelihood of communities and violation of mine worker's rights, among others. The report of the investigation was presented in an open forum and was used to press for the corporation's accountability. The said report was also presented in the Senate Hearing on the Committee on Environment, and the hearings facilitated by the Office of the President, Presidential Adviser for Environmental Protection.

Because of the strong opposition of the community against the resumption of the operation of the TSF 3 using the EIM result, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources Management was forced to suspend the operation of the company until they resolve the TSF 3 breach.

An alliance was also established, the Philexwatch composed of church people, environmental group, academe, that serve as a watch dog in monitoring the Philex incident.

We were also supported by an international expert on mining engineering from the Australian Centre of Geomechanics to help us understand the structural integrity of mining facilities. We also consulted the legal expertise of the Environmental Law Center regarding the legal aspect of demanding accountability of the mining company.

At the grassroots level, the communities learned the value of a collective action in demanding for corporate mining accountability with the support of multisectoral organizations from the academe, church, farmers, environmental advocates, and local communities.

Barriers/Challenges:

Financial constraints were faced by the organizers of the investigation specifically in the logistical requirements for the conduct of the EIM Laboratory analyses for heavy metal is also very costly.

Limited engagement with scientist experts who have the dedication and commitment to make science and technology serve the people.

Lessons learned:

While technical and scientific data can support and concretize the demands and struggles of the people for their lives and rights, this is only secondary to the **action of the impacted community**. Without their voice and assertion, this type of initiatives will not effectively engage relevant government institutions.

Future directions:

Agham will continue to support grassroots communities in their struggles for their right to live in a safe environment In order to do so, AGHAM will:

1. Expand and cultivate a vast network of local and international scientists that may be tapped for such initiatives and effectively expand the membership of AGHAM on a national level. This includes not only professionals but also young science and engineering students in universities and colleges in the country.
2. Strengthen the relationship between scientists and community members through consultations, coordination and formal partnerships.