

Review article

Why do some communities resist mining projects while others do not?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 January 2017
 Received in revised form 28 April 2017
 Accepted 28 April 2017
 Available online 20 May 2017

Keywords:

Conflicts
 Communities
 Participation
 Mining
 Resistance

ABSTRACT

The pace of mineral extraction has greatly accelerated since the mid-1950s, with a major mineral boom taking place in the past decade. Responding to growing demands for more material resources, mining projects have met with frequent resistance from local communities. Yet, not all communities oppose mining projects. Based on an extensive literature review, this paper identifies and discusses factors affecting the likelihood of resistance to mining projects by local communities. Case study evidence suggests that dependency towards mining companies, political marginalisation, and trust in institutions tend to reduce resistance likelihood. In contrast, large environmental impacts, lack of participation, extra-local alliances, and distrust towards state and extractive companies tend to increase resistance, while economic marginalisation, corporate social responsibility activities, remoteness and attachment to place have mixed effects. Systematic assessments of these factors could further confirm patterns of resistance, clarify the needs for local consent processes, and help inform the creation of 'no-go' areas for mining projects to the mutual benefit of companies, communities, and government authorities otherwise affected by socio-environmental impacts and costly deadlocks.

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1. Introduction

The pace of mineral extraction has greatly accelerated over the past 60 years responding to the expanding metabolism of societies consuming more energy and primary commodities (Krausmann et al., 2009; Martinez Alier, 2003). The liberalisation of mining laws and investment codes, financialisation of many commodity markets, and historically low domestic interest rates (Arboleda, 2015; Bridge, 2004; Basu et al., 2016) coupled with a decade of high commodity prices, deregulation, and technological innovations have allowed companies to advance the commodity frontier (Tsing, 2003; Watts, 2015), moving ever greater quantities of soil and water (Prior et al., 2012). To extract remaining resources, companies often go farther and deeper into more ecologically and sometimes socially vulnerable areas. On many occasions these areas are inhabited by communities, many of them indigenous, who suffer the burdens of displacement and pollution due to resource-dependent livelihoods, unequal power distribution, and social inequalities associated with ethnicities, castes, social classes and gender (Martinez Alier et al., 2014). The ensuing conflicts are encompassed by a communications revolution that is connecting and making more visible many of these fights (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005; Castells, 2013; Kirsch, 2014). Resistance by communities is an important dimension of the political economy of mineral extraction (Franks et al., 2014; Gamu et al., 2015), and one particularly relevant in the shaping of commodity frontiers (Exner et al., 2015; Le Billon and Sommerville, 2016; Conde and Kallis, 2012). It has thus become crucial to understand why resistance to mining emerges.

Not all communities resist, however, and if they resist they do not resist with the same objectives, narratives, and intensity. This paper analyses some factors that can explain why some groups resist whilst others do not. Our objective at this point is not to create a pre-emptive tool to predict whether a project will be conflictive or not, but to inform debates seeking to understand resistance to mining; why it emerges and grows in some communities, but not in others. As we examine below, some

factors like distrust among local people towards a company or the state, and the lack of participation by local communities in decision-making processes can be drivers of resistance; whereas other factors such as perceived dependency towards mining companies and some forms of marginalisation hinder resistance.

The concept of resistance can refer to different forms of opposition and mobilisation. Generally representing a counter-hegemonic project or conduct (Rose, 2002), resistance includes two basic elements: *opposition* to existing power relations (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004), and *action*, whether it be “verbal, cognitive or physical”. Resistance can be visible and overt or invisible and covert, often then part of ‘everyday socio-environmental resistance’ (Scott, 2008). Resistance can also be sporadic and anecdotal, or sustained over time and turned into social movements with organised collective actions backed by dense social networks (Tarrow, 1994). Resistance can be pursued for its stated goals, such as cancelling a mining project, or used by communities to increase their bargaining power in negotiations, such as blockading a mine construction site to increase compensation benefits (Anguelovski, 2011; Macintyre and Foale, 2004). The term ‘community’ is used here to describe groups of lay people with links to the surrounding area of mining projects, but does not imply that these groups are immutable, geographically-confined, homogenous and cohesive (on the risks of reductionist understandings of ‘community’, see Agrawal and Gibson, 1999).

This study combines an extensive literature review covering 224 studies mostly published in refereed journals and directly considering community-level forms of resistance around mining (see Bibliography). The search used Google Scholar and Web of Science, and relied on both keywords – including terms such as resistance, conflict, mining, communities – and cross-citations. This was complemented by a direct search in the most relevant journals. Most of the studies identified consist of individual case studies, and more rarely comparative studies including large-N statistical analyses of conflicts and resistance to mining. Although our search was global in scope, it covered only literature in English, and to a lesser extent in Spanish. Most of the case studies covered

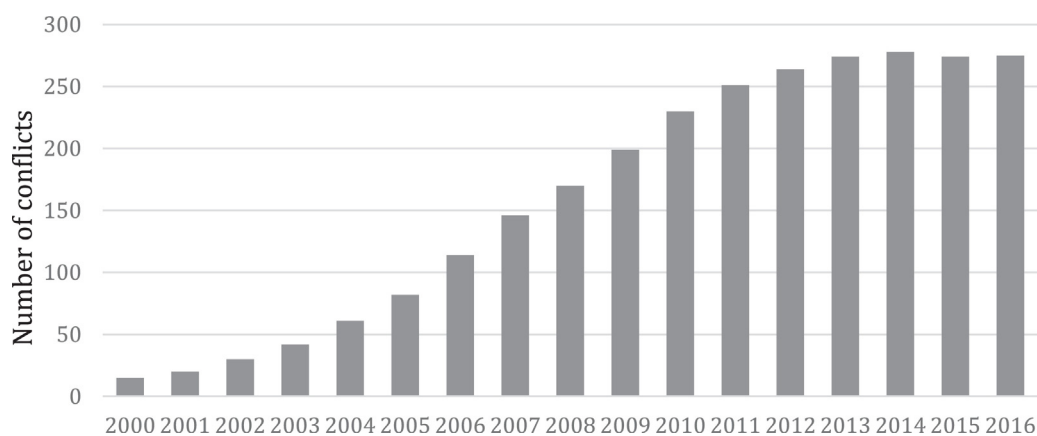


Fig. 1. Cumulative number of new mining conflicts in the world (2000–2016).

Source: EJ Atlas accessed 5 January 2017; Temper et al. (2015).

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