



XOLOBENI MINING IS A TEST CASE OF HOW MUCH COMMITMENT GOVERNMENT HAS TO LOCAL DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES.

Should local destinies be decided locally? That is the heart of the issue around the Wild Coast Xolobeni mining debate.

The Department of Mineral Resources (DMR) has announced that it will hold a legal hearing in Durban to hear oral submissions as to why amaPondo communities are opposed to titanium dune mining along the Wild Coast. DMR say the submissions will be taken into account in the Minister's decision whether to give the go ahead for the mining application. This sets a precedent for DMR, who do not usually consider oral appeals.

No doubt many complicated legal arguments will be given at the hearing. No doubt weighty considerations will be given as to whether DMR has complied with legislative requirements, whether adequate public consultation has taken place with communities, and whether South Africa should be allowing this sort of mining operation to take place by a foreign Australian mining company. Particularly when this type of mining has been disallowed in the home country of Mineral Resources Commodities, the Australian owned mining company that have applied for a mining license in the area. And particularly when the Wild Coast region is considered one of South Africa's most environmentally vulnerable and ecologically important areas, where local communities have built up a long tradition of

life based upon the fruits of the land, and are dependent upon the soil and the water and the natural resources of the place for their subsistence livelihoods.

The arguments that will be heard at the DMR hearing no doubt are important and necessary.

But at the heart of the issue is a much more simple matter. To what extent are local people free to decide on their own local destinies?

AmaPondo Communities who live in the areas that will be mined are adamant that they do not want the mining. They say it is contrary to their deeply held ancestral traditions, will erode their social fabric, and undermine their ability to sustain themselves as they have done for centuries.

These Wild Coast communities, over three years of interaction with Sustaining the Wild Coast, have revealed what sort of 'development' they want for their region. It is not the sort of development that is being foisted on them by the likes of Australian speculative mining companies and DMR under the name of 'progress' and 'poverty relief'. AmaPondo communities argue that the change that mining will bring to their environment will destroy their local social structures and customs and traditions. They do not want a development path that will damage the environment to which they are so closely connected. The amaPondo do not want a development path where they become the downtrodden lackeys of 'outside' interests.

Rather, they want to be active participants in developing small scale community livelihoods projects based around eco-tourism, extend their farming capacities, and develop small community based business ventures. They want to improve their schools', they want improved health facilities, and better maintenance of the existing local road infrastructure. They want to be fully involved protagonists in their own future, shaping a development path that is compatible with their cultural identity and the natural environment that has supported them for generations. They do not want to have someone else's idea of a 'future' foisted upon them.

This issue is clearly not a case of 'mining or no development' as supporters of mining tend to argue. It is a choice between mining, which is being pushed by people who do not live in the area to be mined and so will not directly bear the consequences of the impacts and disruptions to their lives that mining will bring, and other types of development that are favoured by local people.

Ironically, this is not the first time the AmaPondo have faced a battle to have a say in how their local destiny unfolds.

In 1959, under the guise of 'development', 'poverty upliftment' and 'self rule' the Nationalist government passed the Bantustan's Act and set about re-organizing the amaPondo's traditional system of tribal rule by democratically elected chiefs and headmen, into a system of state appointed magistrates and tribal leaders who were little more than government stooges. The Nationalist government also initiated 'betterment schemes' which removed the small scale peasantry off their scattered plots of land into state sponsored village settlements.

In an article of the time Ben Turok* commented "This threat of dispossession of their land the African people regard as the removal of their last shred of security". Turok ironically observed after a tour to the districts that the Eastern amaPondo who had resisted 'betterment' seemed to remain better off than their Western Pondoland counterparts who had succumbed to the 'betterment schemes'.

So deep was the amaPondo resentment at interference over their right to be engaged participants in a democratic form of local government, that they instigated a rebellion in 1960 that came to be known as the Pondo Rebellion. Although that rebellion was summarily and violently crushed by the government of the day, one might suppose that the amaPondo might have felt the battle had finally been won in 1994, when South Africa's first democratically elected government ousted the Nationalist party.

Yet this was not to be.

Once again they are faced with an initiative that threatens to dispossess them of the rights to their land and deprive them of choice in the outcome of their own local future. Again this initiative is presented under the guise of 'development' and 'poverty upliftment'.

Time will soon tell if the amaPondo have finally won their battle to be protagonists in their own destiny, or if they will once again be faced with subjugation by a government more concerned with exerting centralized authority and decision making, than in fulfilling the wishes of ordinary people to have a say in how local development processes unfold.

**Ben Turoks article, The Pondo Revolt, can be found on the SWC website www.swc.org.za*

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