

Chapter 4

Gender, CSR, and Mining: Perspectives From Lao PDR

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the key findings on how the mining industry and MNCs influence various aspects of life and wellbeing of women in Lao PDR. The study shows that mining MNCs can provide various opportunities for women. Mining MNCs have clung to the narrow compliance-based view of CSR for certain periods of time, due to the management system and corporate policies. They seem to focus on economic activities to empower women and promote the concept of gender equality. The data supports the contention that avoiding the potential detrimental effects that mining MNCs can have on fragile ecosystems, gender inequality, and local social issues should be made a priority. Recently, however, mining MNCs have tended to shift their actions to sustainable economic and skill development in Lao, due to their understanding of local contexts. The results also show that opportunities provided by mining MNCs can create long-term benefits to various members of the community including family of the miners, suppliers, trans-border and transnational workers, and women from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

Lao PDR is a small and landlocked developing country in Southeast Asia with a population of approximately 5 million. It has a land area of 236,800 km², stretching more than 1,700 km from north to south. The country borders Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. It also comprises more than 49 ethnic groups from 4 ethnolinguistic families with distinctive cultures and values.

The Lao Government has set clear economic and development objectives. Through foreign direct investment, the mining industry is perceived as one mechanism to liberate the country from the group of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) by the year 2020 (Department of Mines [DOM], 2008). As reported by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2010, the lack of information on socioeconomic characteristics of the poor in Lao, particularly women and people from certain ethnic groups, can lead to less effective planning in empowering women in the community (High, 2010). The alternative is to focus on how mining MNCs can utilise their resources to empower women through their CSR activities.

Given the impact of mining companies in Lao PDR, the dimension of social engagement and building relationships with various other stakeholders in the community is particularly interesting in the context of local communities. This chapter reports different dimensions of how mining companies and the industry influence women in Lao PDR from the community's perspectives.

WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

The Vilabouly community comprises members from Laos, countries outside of Laos and ethnic minorities. While we were working in the field, we observed that the major occupations in Vilabouly include mining-related work, the agricultural sector and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Prior to the advent of the mining industry in the community, most people worked on the farm and in the forest (DOM, 2008). Some may have continued their work when the mining industry was introduced to the community. Some changed their career from the agricultural sector to mining. The relationship between mining and women in the community is a close one.

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