



PRESS RELEASE

CAMPAIGN TO KEEP THE RIVERS ALIVE TAKEN TO COMMUNITIES

Policy Forum Guyana (PFG), last week commenced the systematic phase of its campaign to protect Guyana's rivers from the devastation of mining pollution with a training workshop in Kamarang, Upper Mazaruni. Launched last July with a rally, *'Keep the Rivers Alive'* the campaign aims to monitor rivers polluted.

Based on water monitoring techniques developed by the Global Rivers Environmental Education Network, young people from in the Mazaruni communities of Paruima, Waramadong, Kako, Kamarang, Jawalla and Imbaimadai will be enabled to develop plans to protect water quality on a sustainable basis.

Urgent action at both community and national levels is needed to shield Guyana's once-pristine major rivers from the affects of mining. Seen from the air, long stretches of the Potaro, Cuyuni, Mazaruni and Puruni rivers have been reduced to chains of toxic, sediment-choked muddy pools winding through a blighted landscape.

Strengthening community capacity to combat the negative effects of mining pollution is, however, utterly inadequate without national regulatory and policy frameworks purposefully countering the decades of regulatory abuses ramped up by widespread mechanized mining. Traditional 'small scale' – unmechanized - mining has largely been rendered obsolete, other than 'punting' in the indigenous communities.

This week The Lancet, one of the most prestigious medical journals in the world, in a major Report entitled The Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health states that *"Pollution is the largest environmental cause of disease and premature death in the world today"*, making specific mention of *"mines, and hazardous waste sites...polluted by toxic chemicals, radionuclides, and heavy metals released into air, water, and soil."*

Opposition of powerful vested interests in gold mining has been a perennial barrier to control of pollution, exerting disproportionate influence on mining officials, resisting imposition of effective regulation, tax evasion, impugning the science linking pollution to disease and sickness, manufacturing doubt about the effectiveness of interventions and paralyzing government efforts to impose realistic cost recovery measures.

Developing and industrialising countries can apply these controls to avoid many of the harmful consequences of pollution—to leapfrog over the worst of the human and ecological disasters that have plagued industrial development in the past—and to improve human health and wellbeing. Every dollar invested in control of ambient air pollution in the USA since passage of the Clean Air Act in 1970, for example, is estimated to yield US\$30 in economic benefits.

These interests resist the conclusion – proven across the developed world - that pollution is an avoidable consequence of economic development. As pointed out in the Lancet study *“many pollution control strategies that have proven cost-effective in high-income and middle-income countries can be exported and adapted by cities and countries at every level of income.”*

Whatever forms the Green State Development strategy may adopt, the non-negotiable nature of environmental standards applicable, for example, to freshwater in Guyana has to be sustained. The frequent practice of bending such rules for political reasons must stop. It speaks volumes, for example, that neither side in the growing confrontation between the Rupununi Miners Association and the Ministry of Natural Resources over access to the Marudi Mountains has sought to reference protection of rivers threatened by the expansion of such mining. Any solution to this dispute not accompanied by enforceable environmental guarantees will inevitably see the poisoned fate of the rivers of central and Western Guyana spread to the upper reaches of the Essequibo and Rewa rivers in the South Rupununi.

In light of the horrific, historic destruction of our freshwater river system the onus is on the Government is to publicize and enforce a set of non-negotiable environmental standards applicable to all mining operations of any size. Moreover, the task of ensuring enforcement requires new forms of partnership and collaboration involving the private sector, civil society and the Government to replace the opaque fiefdom that the domestic mining sector has become. Joint restructuring of the sector in conformity with realistic economic costs and modern environmental standards is the central task of such collaboration.

Protecting vital freshwater sources across the mining sector will, moreover, lay a foundation for addressing the emerging hazard posed, for example, by industrial-scale agriculture to the Ireng and Takatu rivers. Without concerted and systematic commitment, environmental injustice on a massive scale will continue to be perpetrated on Guyana’s rivers by the politically privileged.

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Policy Forum Guyana (PFG) is a network of some 20 civil society organizations.

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