



Policy Forum Guyana

PRESS RELEASE: GGDMA'S POWER-DRUNK ELECTION STRATEGY

In his inaugural statement, newly-elected President of the Guyana Gold & Diamond Miners Association (GGDMA) at the end of November, Andron Alphonso, openly challenged miners to use their electoral clout to determine the result of the next election. "We are the swing vote", he announced, claiming over 100,000 people are directly or indirectly involved with mining". He pledged to fight "tooth and nail" to protect the future of the industry against policies that will be detrimental to, or result in the 'desolation' of the industry.

Drawing attention to being the youngest GGDMA President in many years, he committed to recruiting more youth into the ranks of the GGDMA, stating: *"We need the next generation to step up and ... have meaningful participation in the direction in which this Association is going. That is something that we're definitely going to be working on, to bring that younger element into the Association."*

He maintained silence over the fact that the environmental 'desolation' generated by his industry puts him at odds with the majority of the generation he hopes to recruit.

The inter-generational narrative focuses attention on the phenomenal cost of gold-mining to both the Guyanese population and the environment. According to ancient doctrines in many cultural traditions, natural resources, including rivers, fresh air, beaches, minerals and all manner of bio-diversity - known as 'commons' - belong to all the population communally. Not only do they belong to everyone, but the term 'everyone' includes future generations.

The current generation are trustees for these natural assets to which future generations have the same ownership rights. The Constitution of Guyana recognizes this principle as well the links between inheritance and the environment: *"The right of inheritance is guaranteed"* (art.20) and *"The state shall protect the environment for the benefit of present and future generations through reasonable legislative and other measures"* (art. 149 J (2))

Over the past forty years, the current generation has transformed the perception of commons - i.e. publicly-shared inherited assets - into commodities to be bought and sold for private gain. The terminology we normally employ to discuss extractive assets e.g. 'windfall profits' deflects us away from the more accurate term of 'depletion of assets'. This encourages us to see the wealth generated from the sale of oil, gas or gold, as pure profit. We never count the losses. Nor do we ensure that the assets irrevocably lost are replaced by assets of equal value to the present and future generations.

In the Guyanese context, gold-mining has been far and away, the largest contributor to squandering the shared inheritance that mineral wealth ought to represent. According to official sources, a total of 11.1 million ozs of gold have been extracted from Guyana in the forty year period from 1980-2019. Based on yearly average prices over this period, the total value of gold extracted was valued at USD 7.4 billion, or G\$ 1.5 trillion dollars.

Confronted with resources of this magnitude, the only morally relevant question is what tangible benefits do the current generation of Guyanese enjoy as a result of this enormous fire-sale of their assets. Is there a well-funded insurance or pension scheme for miners? Is there a well-appointed housing scheme built by the industry comparable to extra-nuclear housing scheme for sugar workers? Do children of gold-miners routinely receive bursaries to take them through college and university studies? To say nothing of what the industry has not given back to the larger society.

As for the future generation, their bequest from mining is more readily counted in terms of decimated forests and polluted rivers. Were the cost of environmental restoration factored into the above statistics, the cost to the society would double. Would the GGDMA consider funding an institute to promote alternative technology to the use of mercury or to finance a restoration programme? The “truth and nail” pledge would suggest not.

The President of the GGDMA’s reference to the ‘100,000 people associated with the industry’ also disguises accumulation of vast areas under mining licences by a mere handful of very large, but misleadingly termed ‘medium-scale’ local miners, who hold thousands of acres under mining licences, land lorded out to others.

The policies the GGDMA are committed to protecting are neither capitalist nor socialist economics, but more akin to looting. On the one hand there is a constant clamour for subsidies and privileges from the Government to insulate this privileged group from the real costs of extraction, and on the other, they denounce reasonable regulation of the industry that protect the assets of those same citizens. All the while engaging in widespread tax avoidance.

The posture adopted by the GGDMA with respect to the upcoming elections viewed through the lens of the biblical parable of the prodigal son, would have the son return home after squandering the assets bequeathed by his father, not to humbly beg forgiveness, but to bully the father into giving him the assets that belong to his brothers.

Were the younger generation indeed ‘to step up’ and assert the “meaningful participation” that Mr. Alphonso is looking for, the upsurge of climate-concerned youth we have witnessed this year suggest the GGDMA might be in for a surprise.

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