



Policy Forum Guyana

MINING IS NOT AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE

The organizations listed below are appreciative of the success to date of the measures adopted by Ministry of Health's Covid-19 strategy in avoiding steep increases in infections in Guyana. We trust that the positive public response generated by the strategy can be sustained. In support of this goal we wish to raise the following concerns with respect to extractive sector activities in interior communities.

The original list of twelve Essential Services gazetted as exempt from Covid-19 restrictions was self-explanatory. However, a revised and expanded list of services deemed essential, gazetted last week designates 'mining and petroleum' as 'essential services', raising serious questions.

Scientists from the Inter-governmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) conclude in a recent Report that *"Rampant deforestation, uncontrolled expansion of agriculture, intensive farming, mining and infrastructure development, as well as the exploitation of wild species have created a 'perfect storm' for the spillover of diseases."* These activities cause pandemics by bringing more people into contact and conflict with animals, from which 70% of emerging human diseases originate.

In light of the above how mining found its way on to the list is a mystery. Designating a service to be 'essential' implies all Guyanese in some way have a right to it. Even if that were the case with mining, the appropriate agency to protect that right would be the Environmental Protection Agency – not the mining industry.

The reality is that the gold-mining industry does not recognize inherited ownership in common (patrimony) of gold or other natural assets. It is treated as ownerless until 'discovered' by miners. The industry converts publicly-owned assets into private gain at a financial loss to both current and future generations of Guyanese. Moreover, the collateral damage of other natural assets perpetrated by gold-mining extends to destruction of forests, rivers, wild life and fish stocks.

To add insult to injury, the main beneficiaries of gold-mining in Guyana are a handful of people who between them hold hundreds of large-scale mining properties disguised as medium-scale through licensing malpractice. The true value of the wealth generated by gold in Guyana is not known accurately. However, under-reporting of the gold produced is practiced widely. The historical abuses associated with mining are justified by reference to the number of people employed in the industry while accountability for human and environmental health hazards is ignored.

The looming economic recession provoked by Covid-19 has sent the world price of gold close to USD1,800. an ounce. Combined with the austerity felt by the Guyanese population in general as a result of the lockdown, an unprecedented expansion in the gold sector can be expected. Authorities in Madhia are already complaining of illegal forestry and mining being experienced in the District. The situation is aggravated by the withdrawal from the interior of forestry and mining oversight officers due to the Covid-19 lockdown.

Apart from its questionable status as an essential industry, the actual practice of gold-mining aggravates the Covid-19 threat posed to people in interior communities as witnessed by complaints from Chinese Landing (Region1) and the South Rupununi (Region 9). The experience of the HIV-AIDS virus pandemic

two decades ago highlighted the fact that trucking routes play a key role in the spread of the virus. Mining trucks penetrate all parts of the interior. Unlike HIV-AIDS in which contagion depended on the behaviour of miners and truckers, their presence alone is sufficient to drive Covid-19.

Attempts by interior communities to control access to communities are being circumvented by truck drivers. Despite no legal permits for mining in South Rupununi below the 4th parallel of latitude having been issued since 2009, mining operation continues to flourish, rendering mining operations (with the exception of Marudi) illegal. To this extent any commercial activities, including trucking, associated with illegal mining compounds the threat of the Covid-19 virus.

Further, Region 9 remains vulnerable to illegal visitors, despite closure of the border with Brazil. This is particularly alarming given the official complacency in Brazil towards Covid-19, which has resulted in close to 1,000 Yanomami people dying from contact with illegal miners and burials in mass graves even during the night in Manaus. The city's mayor, Arthur Virgilio, recently pleaded *"We aren't in a state of emergency – we're well beyond that. We are in a state of utter disaster ... like a country that is at war – and has lost,"* he said. The killing last week of the Brazilian-Guyanese miner in Marudi by a Manaus-based gang reinforces Guyanese vulnerability.

In light of the above information, the organizations listed below are calling on the Covid-19 Task Force and all other relevant Agencies to adopt the following measures:

- Removal of gold-mining from the list of essential services.
- More robust enforcement measures to prevent interior traffic penetrating interior communities.
- Legal action to be taken against individuals and companies working on or supplying services to illegal mining or forestry operations.
- More rigorous enforcement of border closure and informal crossings with Brazil.
- Undertake a comprehensive cost/benefit review of the mining sector in Guyana to verify the claims made above with respect to abuses of various kinds.

May 1, 2020

Amerindian Peoples Association (APA)
Community-Based Rehabilitation (CBR)
East Coast Clean-Up Committees (ECD7CleanUp)
Guyana Environment Initiative (GEI)
Guyana Human Rights Association (GHRA)
Guyana Society for the Blind (GSB)
Policy Forum Guyana (PFG)
Red Thread
Rights of Children (ROC)
South Rupununi District Council (SRDC)
The Benab Foundation Inc. Guyana
The Ursuline Sisters
Transparency Institute Guyana Inc. (TIGI)