

SOUTH AFRICA

'Infections, not affection'



The 'Vaal Triangle' refers to the area formed by the towns of Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark and Sasolburg about 70km south of Johannesburg, South Africa. It includes the townships of Sebokeng, Boipatong, Bophelong, Zamdela and Sharpeville, and straddles the Vaal River, a major water source for about 12 million people. It is a major industrial region, and home to South Africa's steel giant ArcelorMittal South Africa (formerly the Iron and Steel Corporation – ISCOR) and Sasol, a steel and oil-from-coal processing facility.

In 2006, the area was designated an 'air priority area' because of its status as one of the most polluted regions in South Africa. A 2006 Benchmark Foundation's report¹ found that 'there is pollution of surfaces and groundwater with phenols, iron, oil, fluoride and other hazardous substances, causing health problems, such as respiratory problems, skin irritation, kidney failure, blood in their urine, tiredness and lack of concentration'.

The Vaal Triangle's pollution problems are a result of uninterrupted pollution dating as far back as the 1950s.

The activities of the heavy industries based in this area – two of ArcelorMittal's major steel plants (Vanderbijlpark and Vereeniging), Sasol (a petro-chemical company) and Eskom's Lethabo power station – all add to the toxic mix:

'... Effluent water rushes down unlined canals past a number of smallholdings and townships, to the Vaal River. By day, the work's smoke and vapour plumes mark the sky. By night its lights, noise, flares and smells remind its neighbours of its presence. They are also reminded of their powerful neighbour by a series of devastating changes that have befallen their bodies, their animals and plants, their land and their dreams for the future.'²

In the 1990s, as a result of a global steel crisis and a changing political landscape in South Africa which saw a reduction in state subsidies for ISCOR, the steel giant and other companies in the area retrenched a significant number of workers.



ArcelorMittal's steel mill near Vanderbijlpark.

Photo: VEJA archives

'Between 1993 and 1998, 46,000 jobs, including 20,343 manufacturing jobs, were cut on the Gauteng side of the Vaal Triangle ... In the first decade of democracy, about two million full time formal sector jobs were cut in the name of competitiveness and productivity. Iscor alone cut 30,000 jobs nationally ...'³

Many of the workers were retrenched because they were sick but the company did not disclose this at the time. In the words of one former ISCOR worker from Bophelong, 'ISCOR gave us infections, not affection' (interview, 10

December 2014). According to Samson Mokoena, head of the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA) '... during this transition period, no proper labour laws were followed, including exit medical check-ups and sorting out pension fund payments.'

This led to VEJA working with the Vaal Working Class Crisis Committee (VWCCC) and the Samancor Retrenched Workers Crisis Committee (SWCC) – movements formed by ex-workers in response to the retrenchments as well as to challenge companies on unfair evictions, unfair labour practices and corruption.



VEJA activists marching against ArcelorMittal.

Photo: VEJA archives



WoMin partnered with VEJA to look at the impacts of workplace diseases on wives of ISCOR and Samancor workers, using participatory action research (PAR). Eleven interviews were conducted at two sites – KwaMasiza Hostel, where the majority of residents were employed by ISCOR, and Sebokeng where they were employed by Samancor, a ferro-chrome company.

- Out of the 11 women interviewed, 10 spoke of the health problems of their husbands, including: swollen feet, liver damage, coughing ‘black substance’, body sores and body swelling. Five of the women also reported that their husbands had blood in their urine and impaired sexual functioning or as one of the women described it ‘his knife wasn’t cutting well’ (interview, 11 August 2015).

- For Florence Ubisi, her husband’s death led to a loss of income. She had to stop running her small nut-selling business because of the customary one-year mourning period: ‘... you have to wear black. If you are dressed like that, no one will come close to you. You can’t be touched, no one should brush you, no one will sit next you. No one will buy from you. At sunset you must be home’ (interview, 10 August 2015). An earlier research report⁴ also found particular impacts on women’s reproductive health: ‘Lulu used to work for ISCOR as a crane driver. She smiles a lot, but weeps when she speaks of her inability to have children. She has had two miscarriages, and both fetuses had genetic defects ‘



Wives of ex-Samancor workers participated in PAR focus group discussion, Sebokeng, 11 August 2015.

Photo: J. Pather



VEJA member Victoria Riet, left, conducting an interview. KwaMasiza Hostel is in the background, 10 August 2015.

Photo: J. Pather

In all the cases documented by VEJA and WoMin the wives and families of deceased workers have had to engage in long and often confusing processes to access pension/provident funds, healthcare and other benefits due to them. In the words of one widow:

For the past 15 years I have been struggling to get my husband's money and I don't have the strength now to go further. (August 11, 2015)

References

- 1 Bench Marks Foundation (2010) "Action Voices 2010"
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- 3 Hallows, D. and Munnick, V (2006) "Poisoned spaces: Manufacturing Wealth, Producing Poverty", groundWork.
- 4 Cock, J. and Munnik, V. (2006) "Throwing Stones at a Giant: An account of the Steel Valley struggle against Vanderbijlpark Steel Works", CSS/UKZN.

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For the full report see <http://womin.org.za/images/docs/south-africa-report.pdf>

This research project is a collaboration of WoMin and Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA)



Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance (VEJA) is a network of ten affiliates from various parts of the Vaal Triangle in South Africa. Since inception in 2004, VEJA has worked with the Vaal Working Class Crisis Committee and the Samancor Retrenched Workers Crisis Committee to demand corporate accountability for the occupational health impacts of steel, coal, petrochemical and iron ore production in the Vaal. <https://www.facebook.com/Vaal-Environmental-Justice-Alliance-VEJA-322703054542182/timeline/>



WoMin – African Gender and Extractives Alliance brings together non-governmental organisations and grassroots women resisting destructive extractivism, focusing on mining, oil and gas in Sub-Saharan Africa. Established in 2013, WoMin and its allies undertake women-led research, solidarity exchanges, education and campaigns to promote development models advancing gender, ecological, energy and climate justice. www.womin.org.za