

COMMENT

DEFENDING COMMUNITIES AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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LIFE in Somkhele – a rural village in the northern part of KwaZulu-Natal – has not been the same since the opening of a coal mine in 2011.

The mine has not only brought the continuous buzz of mining's heavy machinery.

It also brought with it coal dust, potholes in roads, land destruction, water pollution and water flow disruption, unfair relocation of settlements and forced removals, exhumations and relocation of graves, greed and violence.

And all of this has been met with constant and unshaken resistance from local activists.

During this time of lockdowns and Covid-19, Somkhele activists and members of the community are being targeted by the pro-mine group for opposing the relocation proposed by the Somkhele coal mine to make way for its expansion – demanding more land for their dirty operation. Between March and April, two Somkhele families (identity withheld) were attacked for standing up against the coal mine and refusing to move.

One family's house was riddled with bullets through the windows in an attempt to kill them. groundWork together with the Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) facilitated a process for the family to be assisted through the human rights defenders fund, to upgrade their home security to fend off further attacks.

The Human Rights Defenders campaign was established in 2019 to help human rights defenders in cases of emergency when there are threats or attacks directed against them.

The establishment of the campaign was motivated by the collaborative research by groundWork, (CER), Human Rights Watch and Earthjustice, which produced the report: "We Know Our Lives Are in Danger".

The report is the output of research that was carried out between 2013 and 2018 documenting the targeting of community rights defenders in KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, North West and the Eastern Cape.

The report cites activists' reports of intimidation, violence, damage to property, use of excessive force, and arbitrary arrest for their activities in highlighting the negative impacts of mining projects in their communities.

The outcome of the research confirmed that there were intimidations, threats and attacks perpetrated towards human rights defenders and made recommendations to all stakeholders.

During the launch of the report, the Open Society Foundation joined groundWork and CER in a discussion which led to the establishment of the Human Rights Defenders Fund to provide financial assistance to human rights defenders for their own safety. Parallel to this process, CER and groundWork launched a campaign called Asina Loyiko (We have no fear).

The campaign was aimed at responding to the "Slapp" suits (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation), a corporate bullying tactic used against environmental activists and NGOs intended to censor, intimidate and silence critics by burdening them with the cost of a legal defence until they abandon their criticism or opposition.

The assistance from environmental defenders' funds does not begin and end with financial provision, but also employs other strategies for activists to defend themselves. For example, groundWork also assisted in the establishment of a community watchdog in Somkhele – this consists of environmental activists looking out for each other and alerting one another in case of any incidents occurring in their community.

Activists are also provided with resources such as airtime, data, and a WhatsApp group is created for communication to flow.

This strategy is at its pilot stage and is monitored constantly, with the aim of implementing it elsewhere in communities where attacks are happening.

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