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‘Life-giving hills’ or ‘national treasure chests’? Exploring contrasting perspectives on resource extraction in India and beyond

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Different worldviews come to the forefront in mining projects to shape how resources are put to use. In eastern India, civil society closely connects mining for aluminium to nature, religion and the future sustenance of the region. In this perspective, the removal of the mineral from the ‘life-giving hills’ which support vulnerable groups of people means the loss of a unique culture and precious biodiversity. Mine planners, however, construct a very different resource world in which the mineral exists in a clearly separate space away from both populations and biodiverse areas. This opens up for mining for the nation’s benefit with few negative consequences. In my talk, I will explore how such contrasting perspectives on resource extraction are created and what the implications are for sustainable, rural development.

Recent social science research on extraction has examined the social and environmental factors that influence how resources are defined, measured, extracted, transported and traded. Large-scale extraction for metals and energy continues to find support in national development policies as the basis for modern societies, and part of inevitable transformations from agricultural to industrial economies. In India, as in most other parts of the world, mining technology has changed in recent decades from underground to open pits. The results are dramatic land use changes and lost rural livelihoods as people are often unable to transition from farming to industrial jobs.

My research has focused on resource extraction across India’s central-eastern mining zone, but also traced Indian companies abroad as they explore new resource frontiers in Mozambique. It is clear that extractive projects lead to a widely varying set of responses to land loss, job promises, wider area development programs, improved infrastructure and

environmental degradation to name just a few. Context-sensitive political ecology research has greatly improved our understandings of the role political processes play in rural transformations advanced by large-scale extraction. My research seeks to combine the political and the discursive aspects of resource projects to allow us to better understand present resource uses, as well as to seek more sustainable alternatives. This is not only important in coal-reliant India. Recent examples from Sweden include proposals for increased ‘green mining’ for battery production, and the long-term grievances of Sami groups who do not agree with mainstream views on resource use.

Methodologically I have drawn on ethnographic fieldwork at and around sites of extraction, but also in bureaucratic corridors to allow me to link policy with extractive practices. In more recent work I have used GIS and low cost air pollution monitors to complement social science analysis in interdisciplinary enquiries. Technical developments of pollution sensors appear especially promising as they offer new opportunities to bridge long-running divisions between decision-makers, scientists and pollution-affected groups. Such methodologies cannot only help us understand how different people make sense of their environments, but also open up for future participatory research to rebuild trust between authorities and citizens at a time of environmental crisis.