



THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS IMPACTS ON THE LIVELIHOODS AND STRUGGLES OF MINING-AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Key Messages:

- *The government's poor response to the COVID-19 pandemic led to a deterioration in the livelihoods and welfare of mining-affected communities.*
- *During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a consistent erosion and weakening of policy safeguards against destructive mining—from the reversal of mine suspensions and closures issued by then-Sec. Gina Lopez in 2017 to the lifting of a moratorium on new mineral agreements, both of which occurred in only one month.*
- *The government used the pandemic to establish the importance of mining activities in the recovery of local economies and allow mining operations to proceed despite local opposition.*

Introduction

On March 9, 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte declared a national State of Public Health Emergency following the reported confirmation of COVID-19 cases in the country. Community quarantine or temporary measures limiting the movement and transportation of individuals were immediately implemented. Initially, on March 14, a General Community Quarantine (GCQ) was ordered, covering the National Capital Region.

Then from March 20 to April 30 a more stringent measure was imposed: Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) covering the entire Luzon Region. This meant: (1) classes and work were suspended, (2) mass gatherings were not allowed, (3) public transport was limited, and (4) interzonal movement was prohibited for unauthorized individuals, among others. Visayas and Mindanao local government units were given the discretion to implement community quarantines as necessary.

The government was expected to improve its testing capacity and contact tracing while the 1 ½ month Enhanced Community Quarantine (strictest) lockdown was implemented over Luzon. But this remains weak¹ and up to now (September 2021) the government's main strategy to curb COVID-19 cases is to impose martial law-like lockdown measures every so often, and—in the true strongman Duterte style—police and apprehend violators.

There is no question that the lockdowns disrupted people's lives. Millions of Filipinos have lost their jobs and have been forced to depend on government assistance, and more people have become impoverished and hungry. Government data showed that in April 2020, the unemployment rate rose to 17.6%, or around 7.2 million unemployed,² and the projected poverty rate averaged between 15.5 and 17.5% in 2021.³

This case study presents what the COVID-19 health crisis and the Duterte administration's actions and inaction from March 2020 to August 2021 meant for mining-affected communities. Further, it shows how the Duterte administration used the pandemic to justify changing policies, (e.g. loosening environmental



safeguards and promoting mining as an economic recovery activity), and giving in to the lobbying of the mining industry.

ATM believes that extractive and destructive activities such as mining and land clearing contribute to the release of pathogens that may cause infectious diseases affecting animals and humans. As such, stopping mining means breaking the chain, and taking a step to prevent the emergence of new diseases.

To provide a background on the large-scale mining situation in the Philippines, a quick overview is shown in Part 1. Part 2 focuses on the impacts of the COVID-19 health crisis on communities as documented from the ATM sites of struggles. Part 3 dwells on the changes in the regulatory framework and policy implementation during the pandemic. Part 4 is the conclusion and ways forward.

1 Philippine Large-scale Mining Situation: Pre-pandemic picture

Large-scale mineral extraction of gold, copper, nickel and chromite, etc. has been taking place in the Philippines prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Foreign investors involved in mining operations here are from Australia, Canada, China, South Korea, Japan, and the United Kingdom. These activities are sanctioned by the national government despite strong opposition from communities and despite the mounting evidence of its negative mining effects on the environment, and threats to Indigenous and rural communities' cultural, social, and economic rights. To date, there are still many mining disasters that have not been fully addressed until now, e.g., Marcopper Mining Disaster in Marinduque,⁴ Philex Mining Tailings Spill in Benguet,⁵ etc.

The Philippine Mining Act of 1995 (Republic Act No. 7942) and Executive Order No. 270-A (issued in 2004) are the legal basis for the aggressive promotion of large-scale mining in the country. This law allows the government to enter into Mineral Processing Sharing Agreements (MPSA) and Financial and Technical Assistance Agreements (FTAA) with mining companies, with the latter even allowing for 100% foreign ownership of mines.

The government's bias for the mining sector has since been questioned by various groups, from the Indigenous and rural communities directly affected by mining activities, environmentalists, human rights advocates, faith-based groups, academic institutions, and other groups. The 2002 Dapitan Declaration on Mining⁶ is one of the earliest statements that called for the repeal of mining laws and the formulation of an alternative mineral policy. Since then, there have been active engagements of groups in lobbying the government.

Meanwhile, there is also active lobbying on the part of the mining industry, which hosts annual international mining conferences and exhibits to invite foreign and local investors to the country. The mining industry maintains its importance by claiming that it contributes to the economy, despite data from the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) showing that it contributes a meager (less than 1%) share to the annual gross domestic product and annually employs around 190,000 people.

In the government's efforts to pursue sustainable development, and balancing extractives and environmental protection, the Aquino administration issued Executive Order No. 79 in 2012. It aims to institutionalize reforms in the mining sectors and to pursue responsible mining,⁷ while not repealing RA 7942 and EO 270-A. Among the welcomed sections of the order include: (1) the review of mining contracts and mining operations; (2) establishment of no go zones; (3) instruction to enact legislation that will



increase government share from mining; (4) taking part in the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative; (5) recognizing local autonomy; and (6) a moratorium on new mining applications).⁸

Yet, despite the good policies on paper, the government remained at the behest of the mining sector. Before the Aquino administration ended in 2016, the mining areas expanded by 6% despite a moratorium on new applications.⁹ Another case in point is the Duterte administration's inability to stand its ground when former environment secretary Regina Lopez suspended 26 large-scale mining projects and cancelled the approval of 75 proposed mines in 2017. The companies appealed their cases to the Office of the President and some were allowed to continue with their business.¹⁰ In effect, it is business as usual for the mining industry, while dealing with some policy safeguards including the policies imposed in EO 79 and Lopez's department's Administrative Order 2017-10 banning the open-pit mining method.¹¹

In this picture, almost always unseen and at the losing end are the Indigenous and rural communities, their children, women, and elders, who experience first-hand the militarization and abuse from armed groups, displacement from their lands, and source of livelihoods, and the impacts of environmental exploitation. Almost always, they are the last to learn about new mining policies and new mining agreements entered into by the government subjecting their lands and territories. And while they raise their voice to assert their rights alongside environment and human rights advocates, their calls are hardly heard and sidelined. Worse, environment and community rights activists are red-tagged by the Duterte administration. In 2019, the Philippines was called the deadliest country for environmental rights defenders.^{12,13}

Over the years, the government's concern for these communities remained little to none, and the situation only worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also in the past months, the government silently gave in to the lobbying of the mining industry that once again dangled mining as a contributor to economic recovery in the time of the COVID-19 crisis.¹⁴

2 Impacts of COVID-19 in the Sites of Struggles

There are many ways that COVID-19 has impacted mining-affected communities—both communities of already operating mines and communities stopping the entry of miners. These impacts have been documented in various Sites of Struggle (SOS), areas where communities partnered with Alyansa Tigil Mina are campaigning against mining. First, as a result of poor planning and reactive response to the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020, community quarantines/lockdowns left the communities unable to work, go to their farms, or sell their products in the market, and this led to the loss of livelihood and household income. While there were government provisions/assistance, there were incidents of discrimination and exclusion in some SOS, and even those who received cash and/or food packs find it insufficient.

Second, there was increased militarization in some areas that resulted in human rights violations, including red-tagging of community leaders. Finally, while the rights defenders in the community and the support groups from other regions are observing quarantine rules and are unable to move, mining operations are freely moving because mining is viewed by the government as a priority industry for economic recovery.

Socio-economic impacts

In March 2020, Luzon-wide enhanced community quarantine/lockdown procedures were imposed covering Cagayan Province, Nueva Vizcaya, Zambales, Oriental Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, and



Palawan. While Visayas and Mindanao did not have known COVID-19 cases in the first half of the same month, the following provinces also implemented lockdowns/restrictions: Leyte, Eastern Samar, South Cotabato, Surigao del Sur, and Dinagat Islands in Surigao del Norte. This meant that travel and mobility were not allowed and most work activities were suspended.

Areas under lockdown have severely constrained the capacities of mining-affected communities. Most of them have lost their jobs, especially those in construction, transportation, manufacturing, food, and support-services sectors, or have seen their incomes from agriculture-based activities be severely hampered. During this period, livelihoods and incomes have dropped to almost zero. This loss of income meant having no food for themselves and their families. This affected not only their physical health but their mental and emotional health as well. Women in the communities carried more of the burden with their ascribed role as food providers.

Meanwhile, even if they had savings or cash assistance, they reported extreme difficulty in procuring food items, either because there are no available supplies or prices are too high for them to afford to buy. By the end of March 2020, there were already dwindling supplies of food in the island ecosystems of Leyte, Oriental Mindoro, Sibuyan in Romblon, and Aroroy in Masbate.

Government support was not accessible to all. Indigenous communities in Kasibu (Nueva Vizcaya), Cabangon (Zambales), Oriental Mindoro, Surigao del Sur, and South Cotabato had limited access to government support. They felt they were given less priority by the government. Meanwhile, in MacArthur (Leyte) and Aroroy (Masbate), communities who were known to oppose mining activities and had a conflict with the local government units were deliberately not given assistance.

Even if they experience discrimination and security threats from ECQ enforcers and paramilitary groups, community organizations that had standing barricades to stop the entry of mining equipment volunteered to convert their barricades to community quarantine checkpoints. The Indigenous communities in Didipio, Nueva Vizcaya and Tampakan, South Cotabato were quick to shift. Community quarantine checkpoints were also set up in Brooke's Point in Palawan, and Maporac in Zambales.

To the community leaders, this was dual purpose: to ensure that they are not exposed to COVID-19 carriers and to prevent unnecessary entry of mine workers and their equipment to their ancestral lands and territories.

Illegal mining activities and increased violence and suppression of the rights of community leaders

The lockdowns were used by the government to restrict environmental rights defenders. Freedom of expression, assembly, and community protests were curtailed. They were threatened, attacked, and criminalized. Meanwhile, mining companies were allowed to continue and even expand their operations. The mining operations, both legal and illegal, posed risks and threats to the community and local environmental groups in terms of possible exposure to the virus as new people were coming in and gathering in the areas, and because of potential environmental impacts brought by their operations.

Illegal mine construction activities in Brooke's Point, Palawan and suspension of a local government leader



In the days before the lockdowns were imposed in Palawan in March 2020, illegal mining operations were reported in Brooke's Point. Constructions were set up by Ipilan Nickel Corporation inside the ancestral domains and primary forest areas even when it had an expired contract. Community groups composed of farmers, women, youth, and Indigenous leaders, joined by Brooke's Point Mayor Jean Feliciano, protested at the mine site on March 9, 2020.¹⁵ Eventually, the mining company's permit was extended.

Meanwhile, in June 2021, Mayor Feliciano was suspended by the Office of the Ombudsman allegedly for her abusing her authority by stopping the operations of Ipilan Nickel Corporation and demolishing its properties in 2017.¹⁶

Violent dispersal of community barricade against illegal mining operations in Kasibu in Nueva Vizcaya

On April 6, 2020, the community barricade led by Bileg Dagiti Babbae, a group of Tuwali women, with Didipio Earthsavers' Multipurpose Association (DESAMA), Samahang Pangkarapatan ng Katutubong Manggagawa at Magsasaka Inc. (SAPAKKMI), and Alyansa ng Magsasaka para sa Kalikasan ng Kasibu (AMKKAS) was violently dispersed by around 100 police personnel.¹⁷ The Financial or Technical Assistance Agreement of OceanaGold Philippines, Inc. (OGPI), a local company of Australian-Canadian mining company OceanaGold, expired in June 2019, but they continued operating illegally.

The community barricade was meant to stop the company from further operating. But they were met by police forces three times their number to assist the entry of OGPI's fuel tanker. The police claimed they received instructions from the Office of the President in a letter signed by Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea. 29 community members to about 100 personnel in full riot gear ended with the illegal detention of the Indigenous leader and chairman of DESAMA, Rolando Pulido.¹⁸ Pulido was stripped off his clothes, handcuffed and beaten by police, then brought to a police precinct in Kasibu. Indigenous women leaders and community members were left with physical injuries, and psychological and emotional trauma.¹⁹

Red-tagging of Indigenous woman and anti-mining leaders in Cabangon, Zambales

On September 22, 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, Teresa Dela Cruz of Sitio Maporac in Cabangon, Zambales was advised by an alleged civilian asset to surrender to the government. Dela Cruz, an IP woman leader and member of Kababaihang Samahan ng Maporac (KASAMA), Maporac Aeta Organization, LILAK – Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights, Legal Rights Center, and Alyansa Tigil Mina, was accused of being a terrorist because of her active engagement in activities led by ATM and other environmental and human rights groups. Prior to the said incident, human rights activists including Dela Cruz filed a petition at the Supreme Court against the Anti-Terror Law (RA 11479).^{20,21}

Almost a month after, on October 19, she was informed by the same asset that two (2) police officers in a conversation with a certain barangay official mentioned her name and discussed about arresting her because of a Facebook post. She engaged the said official on the same day. He denied it. Months later, on February 18, 2021, after an activity led by KASAMA, Dela Cruz and other women members of KASAMA experienced actual surveillance. They were followed by police officers on their way back to their homes.

In a dialogue facilitated by Cabangon Mayor Ronaldo Apostol on March 16, 2021, it was confirmed that Teresa Dela Cruz was a subject of police surveillance, allegedly because of a video recording with Dela Cruz protesting/speaking. Dela Cruz denied any involvement or alliance with any communist group, and explained that all her statements was to call on the government to listen to the plea of Indigenous peoples, women, and the advocacy of MAO and KASAMA.



Illegal mine construction activities in Candelaria, Zambales

In the first quarter of 2021, there were reports that mining and construction equipment had entered Candelaria, in Zambales. The activities were associated by the local governments to Chinese company Yinglong Steel Corporation that is also operating a nickel mine in the neighboring town of Sta. Cruz. Allegedly without necessary permits, they cut down trees, built roads and bunkhouses in preparation for mining expansion, threatening the community's farmlands and water resources.²²

Despite orders to stop, the operations proceeded with little action or response from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). The regional Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) simply said that it is not yet covered by its regulatory power since it was still in the "exploration stage".²³ By July, at the onset of the wet season, the community saw how the activities would affect them—the mud from the excavations was washed off downstream and ruined hectares of farmlands.

3 Beyond Business as Usual for the Mining Industry amidst the COVID-19 Crisis: Fast-tracked permits, reversal of suspension and closure orders, and erosions of policy safeguards

Amidst the pandemic, even if there were existing community quarantine impositions by local government units and strong opposition of Indigenous and local communities, mining activities were happening in many parts of the country. These were either illegal or sanctioned by the government. In the past 17 months, the MGB granted various mining permits for operations in various areas including in Guiuan (Eastern Samar), Kasibu (Nueva Vizcaya), offshore areas of Cagayan, and Brooke's Point in Palawan.

The DENR-MGB, unlike the Philippine economy, is not slowing down. In the past months, it also reviewed the policies, (1) banning new mineral agreements and (2) banning open-pit mining methods of mineral extraction. The lifting of the ban on open-pit mining method, among others, will benefit Sagittarius Mines Inc.'s gold and copper mine in Tampakan (South Cotabato) and St. Augustine Gold and Copper Limited's King-king copper-gold mine in Pantukan (Compostela Valley).

Other government agencies including the DENR's Environmental Management Bureau, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, and the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development also delivered for the mining industry's agenda.

Unfortunately for environmental rights defenders—the communities and their support groups—this is the grim reality. The Philippine government and the mining industry have taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to advance its agenda.

Issuance of permit to export chromite ores from Homonhon Island to China

On March 31, 2020, MGB Region 8 granted a mineral ore export permit to Chromiteking Inc. for the transport of around 7,000 wet metric tons of chromite ore from Homonhon Island in Guiuan, Eastern Samar. This happened when the entire Leyte province, where MGB Region 8 is located, was on lockdown and supposedly unable to report to the office.²⁴ It was also questionable how the mining operations of Chromiteking and Techiron Resources, Inc. were tolerated when there was a standing suspension order against mining operations in the island ecosystem.



On April 4, 2020, Eastern Samar Governor Ben Evardone called on the national government to stop the entry of the Chinese-manned vessel to pick up the chromite ore from the island. DENR intervened and temporarily suspended the mining operations, but allowed the mining operations to proceed after a few days – saying that the company has acquired all necessary quarantine permits.²⁵

Reversal of suspended mining operations agricultural lands in Leyte

In March 2020, before the lockdowns were fully enforced, community leaders in MacArthur, Leyte observed the entry of miners and their equipment in the black sand-rich rice lands of MacArthur and four other municipalities. More than 7,400-hectares of land is covered by a mining permit held by Strong Built Mining Development Corporation (SBMDC) whose permit was cancelled in February 2017. The local groups including members of Save MacArthur, Leyte Movement (SAMACAMO) and the Church leaders opposed this fearing for their health safety and the destruction of their lands.

SAMACAMO reported illegal mining activities, only to find out months later that the permit cancellation issued in 2017 had already been lifted by the DENR in November 2019, after fines and penalties were paid by the mining company. Later, in the following months, DENR announced that five mining companies including SBMDC were allowed to operate.²⁶

FTAA renewal despite LGU and communities' call against mining in Nueva Vizcaya

OceanaGold's 25-year mining permit expired on June 20, 2019. This was a relief for mining-affected communities but they did not rest and asked Duterte and the DENR to no longer renew the expired permit because of its environmental and human rights violations. The resistance against the Didipio mines owned by OGPI is well-documented.^{27,28,29} Yet, the mining permit was processed in secret. Again, this happened while the country was in the middle of a pandemic, and health and economic crisis. In July 2021, OceanaGold received its renewed contract for the next 25 years.³⁰

COVID-19 Diaries: Letters from Indigenous women affected by OceanaGold's operations:

"Tignan niyo po ang aming kalagayan, maawa po kayo sa amin. Nagmamakaawa na huwag niyo pong i-renew ang FTAA ng OceanGold para hindi na tuluyang sirain ang aming mga lupain at hindi tuluyang mawala ang tubig." (Look at our state, have pity on us. We beg you not to renew the FTAA of OceanaGold to stop the destruction of our lands and the eventual water loss.

"Kami po ay humihingi sa ating mahal na pangulo na sana huwag nang pirmahan at i-renew ang FTAA ng OceanaGold... para tuloy-tuloy ang pag-asa at ating palawigin ang pagsasaka sapagkat yon ay hindi lang pansamantalang pagkabuhayan ng mga tao kundi pwede pong ipamana sa sumusunod na henerasyon." (We ask our beloved President not to sign and renew the FTAA of OceanaGold in our area so that we can continue to hope and expand our agricultural activities. Because this is not only our source of livelihood today, but also our gift to the future generation.)

"Kami po ay nananawagan sa kanya (Duterte) na sana po ay maimbestigahan ang pangyayaring incidente noong Abril 06, 2020 5:30 ng hapon para malaman kung ano ang ugat ng illegal or violent dispersal noon araw na iyon." (We call on the President to call for the investigation on the incident on April 6, 2020, 5:30pm and find out what caused the illegal or violent dispersal.)



Processed permits, overturning of provincial policies for Tampakan mine in South Cotabato

In July 2020, the Regional Director of the Environment Management Bureau of DENR (DENR-EMB) Dir. Omar Saikol said in a press conference that the environmental compliance certificate (ECC) of Sagittarius Mines Inc. for the Tampakan gold-copper project in South Cotabato has been reacquired by the company. The same ECC was cancelled by the late DENR secretary Lopez in February 2017 because of the company's failure to comply with its permit conditions. Saikol said, the ECC was reinstated by Duterte in May 2019.³¹ Rather quietly reinstated, it was only in early 2020 that the regional office was informed by the national government's pro-mining move.

Another government agency, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (which is mandated to protect and promote the interest of Indigenous cultural communities) evaluate to process the free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) for the Tampakan mine. This was happening despite the unresolved cases of human rights violations that happened in the past decades,³² and while COVID-19 remains a threat to the communities. To the dismay of the communities and local governments, FPIC in the form of a Certificate of Precondition (CP) was issued by NCIP in October 2020.³³

The Tampakan mining tenement covers around 26,500-hectares of land, straddling in five ancestral domains, which means the mining company should obtain five (5) CPs. But in a twisted interpretation of the NCIP, two out of five communities allowing mining in their lands satisfies the requirement for the mining project to proceed. The Tampakan mine FTAA permit was approved in 1995 and was supposed to expire in March 2020. However, its permit was extended for a period of twelve (12) years in June 2016.

Local environmental and church-based groups, Social Action Center of Marbel and Convergence of Initiatives for Environmental Justice, also reported that the Provincial Government of South Cotabato is currently reviewing its Environment Code that imposed a ban on open-pit mining in the whole province. This was initiated after the local government of Tampakan approved Resolution No. 589 on March 15, 2021, which sought the review of the provincial policy.³⁴

Approval of the country's first large-scale offshore mining operations in Cagayan

In December 2020, JDVC Resources Corporation announced that their black sand mining operations in the offshore areas of Cagayan spanning 1,903 hectares has complied with all government requirements and is ready to proceed.³⁵ The company was permitted to proceed with offshore mining despite local peoples opposition, leaving a standing question as to how mining activities were allowed in their area without local consultations.

Approved extension of Ipilan Nickel Corporation, and issuance of clearance by the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development

Following the reported illegal mining operations of Ipilan Nickel Mining Corporation (INC) in Brooke's Point in May 2020, the DENR extended the company's mining permit on December 21, 2020. The MPSA's expiration was amended to expire in 2025 based on MGB documents. Then more recently, the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) granted the strategic environmental plan (SEP) clearance for INC to proceed with its operations.³⁶

In Palawan, the SEP is clearance is a permit sought from the PCSD required for all environment-related activities in the province. In 2017, the PCSD revoked the SEP clearance of INC citing a conflict in the mining tenement location and the province's environmentally critical areas network map.³⁷



Ban on new mining agreements, mine suspension officially lifted in April 2021

On April 13, 2021, the government officially allowed the mining companies that late environment secretary Lopez suspended and closed in 2017. Through a Stay Order, some mining companies that appealed their cases were allowed to operate again.³⁸

The following day, April 14, 2021, Duterte issued Executive Order No. 130 (EO 130) amending provisions of Section 4 of EO 79, lifting the moratorium on new mineral agreements.³⁹ New mining projects in the pipeline, according to MGB Director Wilfredo Moncano, will generate an estimated Php 50-million (est. US\$ 1-million) in excise tax and Php 5-billion (est. US\$ 99-million) in royalties.⁴⁰ This includes 36 metallic and non-metallic mines that are ready to start operations in 2021 and another 65 that can start development and construction in 2022.⁴¹ They argued the mining activities will help in the recovery of local economies, and the national economy.⁴²

Then more recently, in May 2021, MGB said that the government will lift the ban on open-pit mining in no time.⁴³ In a sly act, MGB included in the draft implementing rules and regulations of EO 130 a repealing clause on the use of open-pit mining method of mineral extraction.⁴⁴ Two (2) days of consultation meeting was allotted to discuss this draft IRR, but groups argue that 2 days of consultations were inadequate to discuss and address the concerns of Indigenous and local communities. In the meetings, among the concerns raised by environmental and human rights groups, including Indigenous peoples' rights advocates, was the lifting of the open-pit mining ban.

On August 2, 2021, the IRR was signed and issued as DENR Administrative Order No. 2021-25 in re: Implementing Rules and Regulations of Executive Order 130 entitled: Amending Section 4 of E.O. No. 79, S. 2012, Institutionalizing and Implementing Reforms in the Philippine Mining Sector, Providing Policies and Guidelines to Ensure Environmental Protection and Responsible Mining in the Utilization of Mineral Resources.⁴⁵ The provision lifting of the ban on open-pit mining was eventually removed in the IRR.⁴⁶

4 Conclusion and Ways Forward

In the 2016 presidential election, among many of Rodrigo Duterte's pronouncements was that he will only allow mining activities that uphold high environmental standards.⁴⁷ In September 2017, even after appointing a replacement to Lopez who was not confirmed in the DENR post, he said he agreed with the ban on open-pit mining.⁴⁸ Then again in his State of the Nation Address (SONA) in 2018, Duterte lashed out at mining companies and demanded them to be responsible for the damages their operations cause. But all these, as proven in the past 5 years, are all talk—mere rhetoric and showmanship to make the communities believe that he is fulfilling his promise.

Duterte's treatment of his promise to address COVID-19 was no different. In his 2020 SONA, he said he will fight COVID-19 with the same fervor as his campaign against illegal drugs⁴⁹ and that the country will be better. But by August 2021, 17 months later, we are still suffering from COVID-19 impacts, with the on-off lockdown restrictions as a strategy to curb increasing COVID-19 cases. Meanwhile, government assistance is always deficient and sometimes discriminatory as experienced by anti-mining groups. For mining-affected communities, this suffering is more magnified, especially with the slow chipping away of the blockades to stop mining in the different sites of struggles and the weakening of policy safeguards against destructive mining.



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But this only makes the cause of the environmental and human rights defenders stronger. Despite the red-tagging and threat against human rights activists, the fight continues—the fast-tracked mining permits and overturned policies will be questioned at the local and national levels. And the enactment of green bills will remain to be pursued. This includes bills on Alternative Minerals Management, Sustainable Forest Management, National Land Use and Management, and Indigenous Communities Conserved Territories and Areas. Likewise, different forms of support for communities in the time of the COVID-19 crisis will continue. The fight for meaningful freedoms persists.



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