

Shared belief vital to mining sustainability



By [Roger Dixon](#)

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The effort to put South Africa's mining industry back on a sustainable growth path is lacking one key ingredient: a shared belief in what the sector could and should deliver.



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A fundamental stumbling block to the sector's progress is that stakeholders simply do not agree on what they want to achieve. Industry stakeholders such as mining companies, government, unions, communities and civil society NGOs are deeply divided and suspicious of each other. This really provides no basis on which to forge a sustainable future.

Shared belief

A useful recent definition of sustainability focused on the "shared belief" that tomorrow will be better than today. Such a shared belief appears to be elusive in our industry today, as the recent conflict around the prospect of mining at Xolobeni in the Eastern Cape clearly indicates. This is despite the fact that the corporate world has long espoused sustainability as a central tenet in mining project development.

Addressing the current impasse will mean confronting the challenge that the mining sector's assets are finite – and are hence in themselves unsustainable. The required sustainability can only be achieved on the strength of concurrent economic development that the mining activity can enable and foster – and which can be carried forward after a mine has closed.

Real collaboration among stakeholders is therefore vital from day one of a mine's conception, as parties must share both a plan and a belief in what the mine can achieve over its life-time and beyond. This common commitment is particularly important because the mining company will in fact exit the scene at some point after mining has ended – leaving the other parties to take forward the post-mining vision.

Sustainability goals

In reaching such a shared belief, stakeholders should draw inspiration from the United Nation's Social Development Goals (SDGs) – which also include Partnerships for the Goals, which address the issues of how communities are represented, how their needs are articulated, whether their relevant forums are effective, and the unhealthy relationship with organised

labour.

The intensely adversarial approach between trade unions and management – aggravated by poor economic conditions – fosters short-termism and a polarisation of positions.

At a political level, government has the power to foster a culture of collaboration, under the imperative of national unity. Through its departments and agencies, government can promote the spirit of constructive partnerships on the ground.

Many of the sustainability challenges in mining are beyond the capacity of a single mine. Ways needed to be found to coordinate and consolidate the actions of mining companies to ensuring a critical mass and optimise their development impact.

ABOUT ROGER DIXON

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