

A Comparative long-term Project on Mining in Papua New Guinea (PNG) (Prof. Bettina Beer, Doris Bacalzo MA, Don Gardner PhD)

The countries of Melanesia have a long history of mineral exploration by outsiders lured by the promise of gold and other valuable metals. Papua New Guinea and other Melanesian nation states brought into being by 20th century decolonization have remained a target for large-scale multinational mining operations. The search for gold, copper, and nickel has been a significant part of the hopes and plans of governments and the extraction of these and other minerals has dominated the national economy of Papua New Guinea. Because mining has a disproportionately large impact on the national economy of PNG (it provides 80% of foreign earnings), it impacts significantly on national politics and the state's international relations. In such small, vulnerable states, where the reach of government across its territory is restricted, the mining industry also has a drastic impact on the physical environment, as well as deep, complex effects on the livelihoods and lives of the peoples located in areas (and surrounding regions) in which it operates. These impacts first begin with the transformation of expectations and cultural values that attend the exploration phase and continue across the generations, to produce long-term, permanent transformations of ways of life.

Recent advances in technology have intensified exploration in PNG, which has resulted in the identification of large prospects that previous surveys were unable to identify.

Our project aims at investigating the various effects of recently proposed large-scale mining operations on local and regional populations in two specific localities in PNG, one with access to urban centres and one in a remote location: respectively, the Markham valley (Morobe Province) and Frieda River (Sandaun Province). Since neither project has yet gone beyond the exploration and feasibility study stage, our aim is to follow developments and changes in these communities and regional populations before actual mining starts. The research team has research experience in both areas and can use existing data and local networks to launch the new project. On the basis of the existing anthropological literature, we expect to focus on local processes and strategies of engagement and changes in social organisation, gender relations, the transformation of land rights and access to resources, inward migration and the intensification of such community problems as drug abuse, prostitution, STDs and health services. The research is aimed to be long-term and it is expected that the definition of central problems will evolve as the analysis and evaluation of data proceeds.

The research is also aimed to assess the impact of the study of large-scale multinational mining operations on anthropological work in PNG. Anthropologists have produced important research on the local effects of particular projects, but anthropologists and other social

scientists have also conducted research as consultants for mining projects and for those opposing such projects and the developers. Important, if sometimes in-house, discussions concerning empirical and theoretical issues have begun to develop around the differences between academic and applied research in this field. It is an important part of the proposed research that it maintains a reflexive posture that might yield results on the processes impacting upon a socially engaged discipline and its intellectual orientations, as well as results on the impact of mining developments, in all their dimensions, in contemporary PNG.