

Extracted from:

Hinojosa L. and A. Bebbington (2007) Fire-fighters or fire-makers? Mining transnational companies and transnational civil-society networks in the Andes. TCD Andes Working Paper.

The Piura-Majaz (Rio Blanco) case (Peru)

The Rio Blanco site contains deposits of copper and molybdenum. Located in the high Andes and in primary cloud forest at the east of the Piura region (Northern Peru – border with Ecuador) the project will be executed on land that belongs to two campesino communities (Segunda Cajas and Yanta) mostly used for extensive pasturing and as a ‘reserve’ for community purposes.

The Rio Blanco project, given in concession in 2001 to Monterrico Metals plc. (a London based company now owned primarily by Chinese capital), would involve an open-pit mine with froth-flotation extraction process, dry-filtered storage of tailings and on-site management of waste rock. Monterrico Metals initiated its operations in 2003 via its wholly-owned Peruvian subsidiary Minera Majaz SA. Exploration began in earnest in 2002-3, following government approval of the company's environmental evaluation – a process that was very far from transparent and which has subsequently been deeply criticized by local organizations and the Peruvian Ombudsman. Exploration is now complete, and the company now needs to secure approval of its Environmental Impact Study in order to convert the exploration project into a fully fledged mine.

Reaction and mobilization against Minera Majaz started in the early period of the exploration process, basically questioning the legality of the MEM's resolutions allowing the occupation of community lands without prior permission from the communities – although illegitimate agreements between the community leaders and the company/MEM would have been registered and used as legal instruments – and the validity of the EIA presented by the company. Protests from the two affected communities were backed up by the Piura Ronderos organization (Campesino Watch) and later on by other communities from Cajamarca, which downstream would be potentially impacted with the project. Mobilization took usually the form of protest (non-violent) marches, however, in 2004 and in 2005 confrontation with the local police ended up with two casualties – one campesino each time march on the mine site.

That incident induced the Regional Government of Piura to form a *Mesa de concertación*, to be coordinated by the Centre for Conflict Analysis and Resolution of the Catholic University (based in Lima). However, this initiative failed being accused of a position far too pro-company. It did also fail the initiative to set a negotiation mission composed by representatives of the province catholic bishop, Oxfam America and CONACAMI. In this later case, however, the mission failed mainly by interference of the local police and the MEM itself, and a local and national ‘media war’ trying to produce public distrust of the commission members, accusing them of anti-mine and terrorists.

In the period after the second march, a new organisation of broader scope was born involving the local governments of the fourth provinces to be most likely affected by the mine the project. That coordinating body took short after the form of a forefront organization (the Front for the Sustainable Development of the Northern Frontier of Peru) and brought together the provinces mayors, leaders of peasant communities and *campesino rondas* and other local defence fronts. A technical group

supporting this new organisation was also formed at that time. This new body, however, could make little progress on the conflict resolution given its negative to accept the participation of Minera Majaz into the dialogue space as it was advocated by the MEM. Additionally, public support from a group of pro-mine *campesinos* had come to play a diluting role for the strength of a unified local-regional space propitious to negotiate with large companies and the central government.

Finally, after the mine was sold by Monterrico Metals to the Chinese consortium Zijin Mining Group Ltd. in the second trimester of 2007, concerns and local protests against the ways in which the Rio Blanco project was trying to consolidate its presence in Piura motivated the promotion of a citizen referendum, which would finally give clear account of the population's position about the project. This was held on Sunday the 16th of September in Piura. That was the latest confrontation between communities and the Majaz mine that resulted in 90% of rejection. Previously and afterwards, comments on the referendum and mining in Piura from ministers, entrepreneurs, and even high representatives of the Catholic Church were constantly in the media, placing Piura and the conflicted relationship between large mining projects and communities in the epicenter of a highly contesting public debate. Explaining the opposition to the Majaz project are arguments regarding socio-environmental concerns – the necessity felt by local population of preserving the natural environment that gives support to their livelihood strategies – and people's position about the absence of a neutral State, which would have been incapable to protecting the interests of their citizens – the rural population from the Carmen de La Frontera, Pacaipampa and Ayabaca districts (Burneo, 2007).