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Lisa E. Sachs

Columbia Law School, Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment, lsachs1@law.columbia.edu

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Sustainable Development Goals: how can the mining sector contribute?

The mining and metals sector is uniquely placed to support the realisation of the SDGs and there is a strong business case to do so

Lisa Sachs

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In September 2015, the heads of 193 United Nations (UN) Member States adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. The agenda provides a successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals, which were adopted in 2000, with a view to ending poverty in all forms and dimensions, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all.

Given their global scope and ambition, the SDGs will not be met without collaboration among all stakeholders – government, private sector, development partners, civil society and communities – incorporating the goals into their activities and engaging in collaborative partnerships, as emphasised in SDG17.

The mining and metals sector is uniquely placed to support the realisation of the SDGs. Large-scale mining is a global industry operating in all corners of the world, and often in remote and under-developed areas where it is capable of mobilising financial, technological and physical resources on a vast scale. According to the International Council on Mining and Metals, mining regularly comprises up to 20% of government revenues, and between 60-90% of total foreign direct investment, in many low- and middle-income countries.

However, while the mining and metals sectors have the potential to catalyse the achievement of a number of the SDGs, mining has historically also caused or exacerbated many problems that the SDGs seek to address. Poorly managed mining operations can result in large-scale displacement of affected populations (including of indigenous and tribal peoples), degradation of the environment (including water sources), social and economic inequality, increased levels of corruption and conflict, gender-based violence, and grave risks to health.

To help stimulate discussion among mining companies and their partners about the potential contribution of the sector, the Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment, the World Economic Forum, the UN Development Programme, and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions

Network have joined together to produce Mapping Mining to the Sustainable Development Goals: A Preliminary Atlas.

The Atlas, which is aimed primarily at mining companies (including their boards, management, and staff), seeks to:

- Increase understanding of how the SDGs relate to the mining industry.

- Raise awareness of the opportunities and challenges that the SDGs pose for the mining industry, and how these issues might be addressed.

- Encourage multi-stakeholder dialogue and collaboration to promote achievement of the SDGs. In practical terms, the Atlas aims to assist mining companies of all sizes in identifying where their activities - from exploration through to mine closure - can align with, and promote achievement of the SDGs. Other stakeholders, including host country governments and civil society, can also make use of the Atlas to identify opportunities for collaborative action and global partnership in furtherance of the goals.

To effectively map the linkages between mining and the SDGs, the Atlas contains one chapter for each goal. Each chapter in turn provides:

- Suggestions for incorporating each SDG into core business activities and functions of mining companies.

- Proposed ways for mining companies to collaborate with other stakeholders and leverage additional resources to achieve each SDG.

- Case studies from mining companies on building up their contributions to achieving the SDGs. While the relevance of each SDG will vary by company and project there is a strong business case to incorporate them into long term investments and strategic priorities, working with other partners in-country and internationally to learn and leverage resources as well as partnerships. Individual companies can use the Atlas to help map the SDGs and corresponding actions that are most relevant for their specific projects.

Ultimately, the success of the SDGs rests on the ability of all states, sectors, and stakeholders to transform consensus around the goals into concerted action. The Atlas provides a strong foundation for essential engagement, dialogue, and collaboration in the mining sector -one of the most important sectors for the success of the 2030 agenda.