

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY HANNAH OWUSU-KORANTENG (DIRECTOR OF TRAINING AND RESEARCH, WACAM) AT THE HUNGER BANQUET, ORGANISED BY OXFAM AMERICA IN PHILADELPHIA ON 13TH MARCH 2004

There is enough empirical evidence to support the fact that hunger and poverty have resulted from inequitable distribution of resources and exclusive policies that have tended to disempower majority of the people in the world. The purpose of the hunger banquet is to enact the global trend where many go hungry in the mist of abundant natural resources. Corporate greed and the desire of capital for super normal profits have created a world in which a few benefit from the wealth and productive efforts of the majority. This is depicted very well in this function where there is more than enough to feed everybody but a few people would have too much of everything and the majority have little or nothing at all. Such greed cuts across race, religion and sex because those who believe in such unjust system are united and working to perpetuate these global distortions.

The establishment of surface mines in farming communities in Ghana has brought untold hardships including hunger to the hitherto productive agricultural communities through displacement, pollution of streams and degradation of farmlands. In the world of extreme greed, it is rather a curse to sit on gold or any other natural resource.

One mining company alone displaced about 18,000 people living in rural farming communities to pave way for surface mining. Some farming communities in Ghana that were displaced by mining had to be resettled in new areas without land for farming. Hunger, disease and poverty have become endemic in the communities that had enough to eat until the global economic order determined their present situation. Gold that had been a symbol of pride for people has now become a symbol of torture and misery for the mining communities. Basic essentials like water have become scarce commodities in communities that had their basic needs before the establishment of surface mines.

A development concept that seeks to exclude the majority of people from the development process would end up perpetuating underdevelopment. There is a growing concern that the world is turning more and more into a jungle law situation where might is right. This undermines global peace and security. The concept of sustainable livelihood emphasises the importance of linking local realities to central policies in development interventions such that the lives of the majority are not sacrificed for narrow profit interest.

Fortunately, individuals, youth and organizations are determined to create a world based on equity, fairness, justice and respect for the dignity and rights of people irrespective of race, religion, sex etc.

My organization, the Wassa Association of Communities Affected by Mining (WACAM) is working with communities who have suffered human rights abuses to the extent of losing their sources of livelihood and self-dignity. WACAM is working in mining communities that have been traumatised by gross human rights abuses and corporate arrogance stemming from the level of influence that the companies wield over the political and traditional structures. In the process of mining investment, communities have had their cultural values eroded through the destruction of sacred groves, cemeteries and natural forests, which sometimes are believed to be the home for many gods. The destruction of forests leads to the loss of indigenous knowledge systems because of the importance of forest to rural communities for herbal preparations, building materials, source of protein and incomes. Illiteracy, poverty and weak negotiating capacity of mining communities have forced mining communities to accept low compensation packages from mining companies. The communities have experienced broken homes/ destruction of extended family system in situations where numbers of rooms were reduced in the resettlements constructed for communities that were displaced by mining. Even the type of buildings constructed for resettled communities did not promote communal living, which is important for rural societies. Some kind of 'modernisation' had been imposed on the resettled communities. Added to this, are the structural flaws of the resettlement buildings constructed for the displaced communities. Some of the so-called modern buildings in mining resettlements started collapsing 2 years after construction whilst the mud houses of the communities could last for decades.

There is a choice to be made between the forces of greed and oppression and the forces of equity, justice and dignity of the human being. WACAM has made a choice and we are confronted with the difficult task of mobilising and strengthening the capacity of mining communities to have effective engagements with large multinational mining companies. We have been working in the area of human rights education and also provide legal support to mining communities that bring up cases against mining companies. We engage in local and international campaigns on community issues and also work on policy advocacy especially in the area of mining law reforms that would be sensitive to community issues. WACAM and similar organisations in the West Africa have recognised the "*investment game*" of multinational mining companies, the World Bank/ IMF where governments are advised to lower standards of mining regulations to attract more investments into the extractive sector. With support from OXFAM America, WACAM is collaborating with organisations and communities in the West African sub region to strengthen mining advocacy capacity in the sub-region for effective engagement with mining companies.

The purpose of this evening's event is to help all of us make choices that would commit us to the objective of advancing the course of peace, and development based on respect for the rights of the majority. It is thus imperative for the majority to change the order for a just world where investments go hand in hand with the preservation of nature and values of the indigenous people. I believe that it is possible

to change the global development agenda, which seeks to perpetuate the exploitative system.

On behalf of the mining communities of Ghana, I wish to express my profound gratitude to Oxfam America for supporting community struggles in Ghana and also for organizing this banquet. I appreciate the enthusiasm and commitment expressed by those present here to enact global hunger and inequalities in the distribution of wealth to draw attention to the fact that the neo-liberal development paradigm is creating hunger and perpetuating underdevelopment.

Thank you.