

Pacific Civil Society Says: ‘Slow down! Experimental Seabed Mining is not a sustainable development option’

As we move toward the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20 in June 2012¹, and in view of the Nadi Conference on Seabed Mining co-organised by the government of Fiji and the International Seabed Authority², we the undersigned civil society groups write to express our deep concern over steps taken to legitimize and fast-track experimental seabed mining as a development option in the Pacific region.

Both Tonga and Nauru are pursuing exploration licenses in international waters in the east Pacific through their sponsorship of companies Tonga Offshore Mining Limited (Tonga) and Nauru Offshore Resources Inc. (Nauru). Korean Ocean Research and Development Institute (KORDI) also believes it will soon receive a licence in Fiji for deep sea mining. The Canadian mining company Nautilus Minerals Inc is expected, as early as the end of 2012, to begin mining the Seafloor Massive Sulphide system at depths of 1.46 kilometres under the sea off the coast of New Ireland in Papua New Guinea. These companies will be extracting high-value minerals, such as, gold, silver, copper, ore, and manganese, shifting their effort to the seas and away from land where their centuries of extraction have led to disappearing mineral deposits.

Experimental seabed mining is a recent trend in ocean exploitation. There is much hype about its advantages especially for poor countries while we hear much less about its risks on the conservation of our common natural heritage and safeguarding of our people’s welfare. There are still significant unanswered questions about the socio-cultural and environmental impacts of seabed mining and of its underlying science. We also don’t know exactly how it will affect other sustainable use of ocean resources.

The world’s first experimental seabed mine in PNG will radically affect the flow of thousands of underwater vents over an 11 hectare area. These high-temperature vents host unique microbes and animals, most of which have not yet been identified or studied. We are not even sure of their specific roles in local and global ecosystems, but some scientists have stated that possibly the origins of life on earth can be found in these vents. The result of this experimental mining is destruction of these vents and the vibrant and unique ecosystems that they support.³

Communities that will potentially be affected are in rural and remote areas of the Pacific, with fragile and biodiversity-important ecosystems. The underwater mine sites and support infrastructures for such purposes as, transportation, stockpiling, trans-shipment and processing of minerals, will be located close to coastal communities that rely heavily on the sea for their diet and income.

¹ Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/>

² For further information visit: <http://www.isa.org.jm/en/scientific/workshops/2011>

³ For further information see Professor Richard Steiner’s report: “Independent Review of the Environmental Impact statement for the proposed Nautilus Minerals Solwara 1 Seabed Mining Project, Papua New Guinea. A copy can be obtained from: <http://ramumine.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/full-report.pdf>

The project is already raising alarm among these directly affected communities. In PNG, citizens are questioning the political process that led to the licensing of the New Ireland project and other mining developments where there is little concern shown by successive governments to address core human rights and sustainable development concerns. In Fiji concerns are being raised on the usefulness of extractive industries as an overall development strategy, with calls from civil society for ecologically-sound alternatives.

Legitimising experimental mining

We are angry that SOPAC, with the financial support of the European Union, is assisting Pacific states to push forward the development of a regional legislative and regulatory framework for experimental seabed mining.⁴ Under this rubric of socio-economic development, experimental seabed mining becomes established as a lawful activity, without the benefit of adequate scientific debates nor of prior public dialogue and meaningful community participation. The EU-funded project includes the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

Why develop a legislative regime for something that has not even proved itself? Why the rush?

Industry and governments appear to have abandoned the application of a precautionary approach and any pretence of balancing profits with conservation, human rights compliance, and sustainable development. Experimental seabed mining must surely be a prime situation to apply the precautionary approach as an integral part of due diligence obligations, including:

*“in situations where scientific evidence concerning the scope and potential negative impact of the activity in question is insufficient but where there are plausible indications of potential risks”.*⁵

We call on Pacific governments, technical agencies and donors to immediately stop legitimizing seabed mining and instead apply the precautionary approach to the issue of extractive industries and other similar corporate activities in the region. We remind technical agencies and donors such as SOPAC and the EU to recognise that their overall responsibility is to ensure the common heritage and sustainable development for all, especially the people of the region. The people of the Pacific require much more scientific evidence before our environment and its peoples can again be used as a testing ground for the rest of the world.

We stood together as a region when nuclear proliferation was being pushed by external parties, and we will do so again against new forms of human rights violations and unsustainable development, such as the kind being pushed based on danger-filled extractive industries.

Signed by the following organisations and individuals:

⁴ The project is tasked to deliver against four key areas: (1) Development of regional legislative and regulatory frameworks for offshore minerals exploration and mining (2) formulation of national policy, legislation and regulations; (3) build national capacities – supporting active participation of PICs nationals in the offshore mining industry; and (4) effective management and monitoring of offshore exploration and mining operations.

⁵ Rio Declaration on Environment and Development

<http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?DocumentID=78&ArticleID=1163> Principle 15

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