

Bread from Stones?

Summary overview of the Crawford Fund 2013 Annual Conference, August 2013

You cannot eat stones, just as you cannot eat iron ore or coal; but the production and sale of valuable minerals and precious stones can pay for bread and other nutritious food products.

Economic activity generated by mining industries can contribute equitably to broader national growth and to economic well-being, including supporting the poor. Similarly, infrastructure built for mining industries can ease the supply of inputs, and access to markets, for the agriculture sector.

These happy outcomes can only be achieved with the right mix of policies, governance structures — functioning democracies — and enlightened self-interest on the part of the miners. Reform is needed at all levels, including big government policy issues; major investment decisions and social responsibility programs by corporations large and small; and cooperative on-ground action by miners and agriculturalists.

If these and a number of other challenges — such as need for cross-ministerial collaboration, community participation, science and technology expertise, revenue transparency and impact assessment capacity — can be addressed effectively, then there could be synergy between agriculture and mining sectors. Together, they could support the development of infrastructure, technological innovation and mechanisation, employment and income generation.

These themes resonated throughout the Crawford Fund Conference ‘Bread from Stones’ on 26–27 August 2013, organised in partnership with the Africa Australia Research Forum during Africa Down Under in Perth, Western Australia.

For the speakers and delegates, from across Africa, Australia and overseas, it was clear that the prominence, and importance, of the mineral resource industry should not obscure the importance of agriculture in these countries. We must find ways for the mining and agricultural industries to work together. Healthy mining industries should boost national incomes, including incomes for the agricultural industries capable of meeting the increased demand for their produce generated by income growth. This consideration creates the need for sound policy formulation and implementation.

Policy needs to work at the interfaces between not only agriculture and mining but also large mining enterprises and artisanal miners: members of many African families have moved from agriculture into micro- and small-scale mining.

Delegates were shown positive examples where Australian mining companies in Africa support corporate social responsibility projects in agriculture. We also heard about, and discussed, the existence of tension between corporate responsibilities for profitable investments and broader government and community relationships. Indeed, as one speaker said, there is no single recipe: each mine’s life is limited; companies are neither charities nor an arm of government.

The conference was a first step towards purposeful discussion on potential synergies between two strong economic drivers — agriculture and mining — in Africa and elsewhere.

A vital conversation on policy and practice has begun.