Assessing the Differences Between the Management of Disruptive Environmental and Social Issues by Canadian Multinational Gold Companies

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Mining activities provide significant economic and social benefits to Canada, and to the areas in which Canadian multinational mining companies operate internationally. However, mining activities also present both social and environmental issues. Despite the efforts to mitigate these issues through a number of risk management tools, including those of corporate social responsibility (CSR), they continue to take place. This study sought to assess whether Canadian multinational gold companies identify and address environmental issues differently than social ones. Through an exploratory sequential mixed-methods research design, Canadian senior- and intermediate-level multinational gold companies were selected as the population of this study (n=14). Data from five semi-structured interviews with industry experts revealed that companies respond to environmental and social issues differently. Following the interviews, a quantitative content analysis was undertaken of annual and sustainability reports for all fourteen companies to determine whether differences found between environmental and social issues in the interviews were reflected in not only the corporate reports of those businesses interviewed, but also the population more broadly. Results revealed that social issues tend to have a lingering effect as compared with environmental issues, for which several explanations are advanced, such as the prescribed methods that are in place to address environmental issues, though have not been established for social issues. This research identifies the need for industry practitioners to find best practices to identify and respond to social issues. Hence, it is recommended that forums be established where companies that have faced certain social issues can collaborate with industry peers to develop prescribed ways to try to prevent and address these issues. Finally, the authors propose that an industry association establish a platform for these forums.