

“We contradicted them because we know this land:”
Trust, technology and expertise in mining conflicts

Since the 1990s, transnational mining firms have increasingly sought new deposits in the developing world. This shift in global patterns of mineral activity has led to much contestation of mining by residents of mining host communities and their activist allies. Mining companies have redoubled their efforts to implement corporate social responsibility (CSR) since the turn of the Twenty First Century as a means to ameliorate these growing tensions. Many innovations in CSR have brought about limited success, but social unrest continues to widely accompany mineral development. In this lecture I present data from research around two major gold mines in Guatemala. Much of the literature treats mining conflicts as a function of resource scarcity, territorial sovereignty or environmental cosmology. These explanations, while helpful, overlook the social-psychological dimensions of environmental decision-making. Trust is an essential and largely ignored element of new mineral conflicts. I argue that two trust types—institutional and relational trust—help explain how host community residents form preferences about mining in their territory. I further argue that individuals’ sense of self-efficacy underlies their decisions about whom to trust or distrust. Understanding the microsociology of why individuals choose to trust or mistrust mining companies can provide insights into the limited achievements of CSR programming to date and help shape how engineers working in extractive industries bring about substantive empowerment of host community residents.