TYPE Editorial
PUBLISHED 12 June 2023
DOI 10.3389/frsc.2023.1204093

OPEN ACCESS

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RECEIVED 11 April 2023
ACCEPTED 15 May 2023
PUBLISHED 12 June 2023

CITATION
Marais L (2023) Editorial: Mining towns and cities in the global south.
Front. Sustain. Cities 5:1204093.
doi: 10.3389/frsc.2023.1204093

Editorial: Mining towns and cities in the global south

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KEYWORDS

mining, mining towns, migration, closure, communities

Editorial on the Research Topic
Mining towns and cities in the global south

Mining depends on finite mineral resources and the volatility of global markets. Consequently, mines open and close. Yet, planning systems often assume long-term growth or narrowly serve the interest of the mining companies. Mining companies have embraced lifecycle planning to include planning from the "cradle to grave" of mining projects, but this has not necessarily been the case in the public planning and governance sphere. Why do we develop towns and cities linked to finite or volatile economic activities? Furthermore, why do we not think about closure when planning mining cities and towns? Although this is a global problem, these questions are more important in the Global South, where economic diversification is difficult and mining creates economic dependencies. This special edition is a small step toward investigating the reality of growth and closure. Two of the featured case studies reflect on bust cycles or possible decline, while the third considers migration in this context.

Initially, company towns developed because mining companies wanted to attract labor to remote areas. Mining companies became responsible for the employment and housing of their workforce. Governments allowed this as it did not require public resources. Consequently, mining companies managed towns in addition to running mines. Although this dominance of mining companies in the management of towns changed in Canada in the 1930s, the company town approach elsewhere only started to change in the 1970s. Policy changes by mining companies were initially slow and often resulted from changing tax regimes. However, by 2002, the industry formally changed its approach (Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development, 2002). Company towns became an outdated concept and collaborative planning became the norm. The focus on collaborative planning is important as mines still felt that they could play a local role (but not a dominant one). Yet, fly-in-fly-out labor policies have also affected regional development (also known as the no-town policy). Although some company towns still exist, creating open towns under public governance is now the norm (the process is also known as normalization) if fly-in-fly-out approaches do not apply. Despite the management changes, the problem of mining towns is a double-edged sword: these places struggle to cope when a mine opens and are severely affected when it closes. The shift to public governance and management adds to the complexity. Local planners now need to deal with boom and bust cycles. In a recent paper about new gas developments in Queensland, Australia, the researchers state that mining areas "should be careful what they wish for" (Mckenzie et al., 2023). Although the paper by Mckenzie et al. (2023) focuses on the consequences of mining growth, planning decline could add to the current complexities. It is against this context of the complexities associated with mining towns that three papers have been collated in this special edition.

The paper by Cole and Broadhurst emphasizes that despite not being actively involved in the management of towns, mining companies should play a role in achieving the sustainable development goals in host communities. While there is evidence of mining companies applying the SDGs at the company level, it is not clear that this occurs at the mining sites and in host communities. There is often no clarity about host communities and who should benefit from applying the SDGs. The paper identifies these host communities in the West Rand (there are still a few company towns) and shows that inequalities and informality are common in and between mining host communities. They argue that mine closure might exaggerate these trends. Although the paper by Cole and Broadhurst does not go that far, it also means that these social investments should not create long-term burdens on mining communities or make closure more difficult.

In the second paper, Nel et al. add to the complexities associated with mining and its effects on towns: likely forced closure because of climate change requirements. South Africa is the G20 country with the largest dependence on coal for energy. Globally, the term "just transition" has developed due to the negative impacts on local workers and communities created by closing coal mines. As this is not a natural transition but has been enforced by global climate mitigation measures, workers and communities dependent on coal demand a "just transition". A "just transition" requires local and national responses to counter the socioeconomic consequences of decisions to mitigate climate change. The paper examines the potential consequences and responses of towns in light of the closure of mines and power stations in Mpumalanga, South Africa. The authors ask whether there are signs of regional resilience. Nel et al. are concerned about the limited local responses in Mpumalanga. Most company towns in the area have closed (been normalized), resulting in the municipal authorities (not the mines) taking responsibility for dealing with the transition.

Finally, Pretorius and Blaauw shift the discussion by analyzing migration patterns. The question is whether people, through migration and mobility, are adjusting to the booms and busts associated with mining. Yet, the paper finds intensified migration to the three mining areas in their study. This high influx of people to small towns and secondary cities adds to the overall complexities of mine development. These migrants are often younger (a point made in the paper) and create social problems in host communities. This influx creates social disruption and pressure on local authorities to provide housing and infrastructure. Often, this contributes to informality in mining towns as the authorities cannot meet the demand.

These three papers provide initial evidence of the complexities associated with mining towns. To some degree, these towns and their councils must manage the complex nature of mining growth and decline. Too often, the focus is on the challenges and disruption of opening a mine. More attention could be devoted to planning mine openings in such a way that it considers the implications of closure. There is a need for more work that links the effects of mining on communities by considering both the opening and closure of the mines. There is also a need to link mine closure and the shrinking cities literature more prominently. Although full abandonment in the case studies in this special edition is unlikely, the main planning lessons are that planners should consider the implications of closure early and be flexible and adapt if needed. Shrinking need not be a "death sentence". Both of these concepts require conceptual development in the context of cities in the Global South.

Author contributions

LM conceptualized and wrote the paper.

Conflict of interest

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