

Report

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Mining conflicts abroad offer local lessons

Environmental conflicts as far away as Guatemala can have lessons for us in Central Illinois.

Assistant Professor of Sociology Michael Dougherty studies the thought processes behind Central American villagers deciding for or against mining firms setting up camp in their area. As a sociologist, Dougherty examines how decisions are made to support or reject environmental conflicts.

“Most people look at the area and assume there is a unanimous and immediate decision to reject these large mining firms coming to villages, but there is ambiguity,” said Dougherty, who recently published the findings of his field work that included more than 100 interviews over four municipalities in Guatemala. “There is a tendency to overlook the ways in which local governments grapple with the decision.”

Mining firms do offer incentives to villages that governments cannot, noted Dougherty. “They often offer to build a road or water system. Many rural areas in Guatemala do not have indoor plumbing, so these incentives are very valuable. Local governments do see the economic advantages.”

An overwhelming number of local governments do end up opposing the mining firms, but not unanimously, and not without debate. In Dougherty’s studies, he found 74 percent tend to side against the firms. “That is actually a much lower number than most people believe,” he said.

For Dougherty, how villages arrive at the decision to accept or reject a firm is just as important as the outcome of the debate. “There is an argument that can be made for self-efficacy. The higher the belief in yourself, the less likely you are to trust an outside entity, or a governmental entity,” he said.

Those people or communities with a higher belief in their own abilities tend to reject outside forces, Dougherty noted. “These people are more skeptical of outside companies. They are not enticed by incentives, because they have a belief they can achieve things on their own.” Those groups that place more trust in external authority tend to support larger projects like mining. “These people say to themselves, ‘The government is okay with it. There is an environmental study done. Who am I to question this?’” he said.

The ideas behind the study could give insights to groups looking to begin campaigns for or against environmental projects. “If people want to better engage citizens to their side, then they need to understand why people make decisions to offer support,” he said.

Parallels can be made to the fracking debate in Illinois, which looks to pull natural gas from pockets deep within the ground. “Looking into the process of how people come to these decisions can be important for any group or organization creating a similar campaign,” said Dougherty. “Culturally and economically, the people in Southern Illinois are different from people in rural villages in Guatemala, but there is a parallel in how people reach decisions

The article on Guatemala mining, written by Dougherty and co-author Tricia Olsen from the University of Denver, appears online in the *Journal of Cleaner Production*.
