

Article

Social Responsibility of Mining Companies at a Time of COVID-19: Dear Shareholders!

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Abstract: This paper examines annual reports (ARs) of multinational mining companies Glencore, Rio Tinto and BHP framed by the challenge of COVID-19 in 2020. We apply a linguistic analysis to screening the letters of chairmen and CEOs that encapsulate an ideology of mining, prioritize the message of sustained and prospective financial success, and display commitment to employees and communities. Using critical discourse analysis, we explore how corporations involved in destructive activities managed to mask the nature of their conduct and promote positive PR when expected to document an on-the-ground involvement with employees and local communities due to the global pandemic. We accounted for the ideology of mining natural resources, the central message foregrounded in the reports, the selection and distribution of key topics and keywords, and relexicalization of critical concepts and descriptions. The CDA revealed “smart management” of COVID-19 aimed to hide facts related to the destruction of the environment and to manipulate people in exchange for education, financial rewards and social improvement. The critical contribution of our paper is that the COVID-19 crisis became an opportunity for corporations to display resilience as well as to manage, dominate and render local populations dependent and vulnerable.

Keywords: annual reports; critical discourse analysis; mining multinationals; natural resources; social values; keywords; relexicalizing



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1. Introduction

The annual reports (ARs) of Glencore, Rio Tinto and BHP mining companies encapsulate the ideology of mining, prioritize the message of sustained and prospective financial success, and display commitment to people, employees and communities (Glencore AR 2020 available at https://www.glencore.com/dam/jcr:e03a8caf-f2aa-46ad-81c5-821719caf5bf/Glencore_AR20_Interactive.pdf accessed on 5 May 2021 [1]; Rio Tinto AR 2020 available at <https://www.riotinto.com/-/media/Content/Documents/Invest/Reports/Annual-reports/RT-Annual-report-2020.pdf?rev=6df52113b92840648d05a4ac9e4cc1d8> accessed on 5 May 2021 [2]; BHP AR 2020 available at https://www.bhp.com/-/media/documents/investors/annual-reports/2020/200915_bhpannualreport2020.pdf accessed on 5 May 2021. [3]). The goal of our study is to show that “smart management” of COVID-19 in 2020 was used to foreground companies’ reliability, social sensitivity and responsibility in spite of the destructive nature of their performance. Mining implies destroying the natural wealth of habitats and communities. The global pandemic became an unprecedented opportunity to “manage” not only the virus and thus display an overall resilience but also to manage, dominate and render dependent and vulnerable local populations; not only to show human face of the industry but to alter its negative perception once for all (Similarly, the disastrous incident of blowing up worship sites became a chance for Rio

Tinto to acknowledge their guilt and promise to become culturally aware of local values and practices).

We have scrutinized language used by the corporations involved in mining to mask the nature of their conduct when reporting formally on their activity. Their reports include letters and statements of chairmen and chief executive officers addressed to investors and shareholders, and count around 300 pages of narratives and visuals detailing the companies' activities over the past year. While critically reading the reports, we have identified linguistic strategies, such as presenting the information through keywords and relexicalizations as well as omitting information altogether. The strategies are critical in understanding the actual content of the reports, which we aim to display. Our research is backed up by the theory of critical discourse analysis (CDA). We critically analyze how the reports use language, distribute keywords in the texts and rename common concepts to affect one's processing of information (see Fairclough 1995 [4] and 2001 [5]; Stubbs 1997 [6]). Our conclusions are embedded in language data that are undisputable. The finding that companies camouflage their activity by strategic usage of language is crucial; it impacts the very status of the reports. The critical contribution of our paper is that the three mining giants found a way to turn the crisis into an opportunity to increase their visibility and social involvement with local communities. Yet, their primary allegiance has remained with shareholders obliging the companies to generate cash flow, regardless the crisis.

Just as in the preceding years, the discourse representing mining activity of the companies delivered predictable news of successful business, declared publicly noble intentions undertaken on behalf of humanity and rationalized the activity of mining. The companies claimed social and environmental allegiance, aware of shareholders' face-saving attention to origins of and reasons for financial gains. However, reporting on the year 2020 when the global pandemic caused an all-around turbulence set an additional expectation for the companies obliging them to document how they cared for those impacted by the pandemic. Could they prove an on-the-ground involvement with the employees and people living in the vicinity of mining sites? To accomplish this, the companies double-tasked the discourse of annual reports to show themselves as (1) global leaders of the industry advancing innovative technologies and "responsible mining" strategies and as (2) institutions caring for their employers and communities. To comply with the requirement and declare legitimacy, the mining companies have emphasized their social concern for the needs of their employees as well as those of communities "hosting" them in how they wrote about concerns and values. However, documenting the care turned out to be not only critical but also difficult. Critical analysis showed the discourse aimed to make evident local responsibilities, global commitment and local sensitivities fallible. The reports continued to sideline the issue of damaging environments and communities, and engaging Indigenous peoples in participating in the ensuing damage for the sake of mining natural resources. They stated facts and data to impress the addressees and present the companies as trustworthy social partners who have been progressively aligned with global trends in mining as well as with local communities. But these facts and data misdirected one's attention away from the ensuing damage and neglect.

2. Theoretical Framework and Relevant Scholarship

Clatworthy and Jones, 2003 accounted for narrative strategies used in financial reporting where good news was amplified and the bad news was reduced [7]. Similarly, the study of Leung, Parker and Courtis, 2015 showed how writers of financial reports aimed to manage not only accounting but also readers' impressions [8]. Falschlunger, Eisl, Losbichler and Greil, 2015 concentrated on the so called impression management affected by means of graphic presentation of key performance variables in annual reports [9]. To maintain companies' legitimacy, complex non-financial reporting frameworks reflecting companies' comprehensive accountability, including long-term risk as well as environmental and social sustainability, have been developed to offer exhaustive social and environmental disclosure [10]. The ultimate goal was to improve the quality of information disclosure to

various groups of stakeholders and mainly the shareholders. Ioannou and Serafeim, 2017 explored implications of mandatory sustainability reporting in China, Denmark, Malaysia, and South Africa and concluded that mandatory reporting has had a positive impact on disclosure quality [11].

Complexity of the narrative has been aimed to enhance stakeholders' positive impression, also in controversial segments, e.g., in mining [12]. Guthrie and Parker [13] offered an analysis of disclosure practices showing that the practices reduced shareholders' uncertainty and increase their legitimacy [14,15]. (In the words of Simon Thompson, the Rio Tinto Chairman, "Shareholders are increasingly concerned not only on the financial return that they can earn on their investment but also on how that return is made", Annual Report 2020, [2] p. 7). Further effort was exercised to impress investors and secure their continuous support [16] and promote their positive public relations [17] and a conscious and caring company [18].

Emerging topics in CSR reporting are discussed by Venturielli et al. concentrating on CSR practices in family firms and communities [19], Cosma et al. exploring communication on sustainable development in banking [20] and Iazzi et al. studying specifics of CSR communication between management and stakeholders in the so-called healthy food sector [21].

3. Materials and Research Methods

Traditionally, the reports predominantly contained economic information and financial analyses of the preceding year's data. But in the recent decades, the narrative itself concerning the context and circumstances affecting mining activities (i.e., the style, format and word choices) was recognized as contributing in a major way to how the data were perceived. The manner of constructing presentations, including linguistic and visual means, taints the overall perception significantly, affecting the truth value of specific statements, impressing stakeholders and convincing investors about legitimacy of the activity they support. Reports have thus become more comprehensive and informative, which provided room for diverse and even contradictory interpretation. Among others, the public, stakeholders and investors have expected that the companies make evident their social and ecological responsibility (e.g., environmental protection, social and ecological safety and diversity, women integration into the workplace and access to equal rights) and thus provide a reasonable basis for their continued investment and legitimate support.

Long-term values and goals of the companies have been expressed in ways that appealed to stakeholders, promised attractive trade-offs to employees and appeared aligned with needs of the communities and local populations. Indeed, the discourse displayed social responsibility and respect for people but it also hid facts related to the destruction of the environment in which these very people lived. To justify their mining activity, the companies argued bringing jobs to poor jurisdictions, being committed to local communities and supporting talented young workers ("Normalising accounts are verbal remedial strategies, such as justifications, excuses and apologies whose purpose is to repair organizational legitimacy and reputation", Merkl-Davies and Brennan 2011 [22]). In the locations where the companies mined, their promises and warranties have been directed at leading locals out of poverty, guaranteeing them education and enabling their social improvement. But, at the same time, they manipulated people into ignoring the damage their communities incurred due to the mining activity in exchange for education, financial reward and social improvement of carefully selected populations (See Rio Tinto claiming their support of graduates and students available at <https://www.riotinto.com/careers/graduates-students>, accessed on 30 October 2021) or the BHP Community support ("Through our social investment contribution, more than 427,000 students participated in community projects and 1747 people received job-related training through our community partners. More than 840 scholarships were awarded, including 465 to young Indigenous peoples and 436 to young women", BHP AR 2020, section Community, [3] p. 70). Locally, these trade-offs have been difficult to resist (see [23–25]).

Company spokesmen adopted a special linguistic register in their letters and statements to foreground their intentions and goals, and appear legitimate. The language has functioned as a cover-up for actions that have been sinister in reality, endangered lives of local and indigenous populations and included risks to the environment. We applied the case study method to analyze critically the texts dealing with social values and concerns in the three Reports. As we explored this register, identified the linguistic strategies it employed and speculated about their effect, we also pondered the questions whether (1) heightened community involvement during the COVID-19 crisis claimed by the companies in the Annual Reports was turned to social, economic and environmental acts benefitting communities, (2) the companies acknowledged an a priori dependence on human rather than just “natural” resources, and whether (3) the companies used the COVID-19 crisis to overcome the social and cultural distance separating them from the communities whose people they not only employed but also exploited. In other words, did social and ecological responsibilities presented in the reports outweigh business allegiances? Did handling the global pandemic take precedence over the ideology of mining? Did the companies manage not only to deliver cash but also to care for people in crisis? And finally, did the report writers seek to repair reputation damaged by the perception of the companies as exploiting natural resources belonging to third world countries and the natural environment inhabited by indigenous populations and ethnic communities (see also Benoit, 1997 [26])?

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a qualitative research strategy to reveal a sidelined agenda and undeclared goals, and to identify strategies through which a topic is constructed or avoided. Linguistic analysis and CDA, in particular, represent appropriate tools to analyze texts that construct an alternate reality misrepresenting the one on the ground. The mining reports use language as a generator of a particular discourse, numbers and facts. Their arrangement and choices direct readers’ attention into approving (rather than questioning) the conduct of mining companies and away from the knowledge that has remained unreported. Applying the CDA perspective, we build upon van Dijk 2001 [27] and 2008 [28]; Fairclough 1989 [29], 1995 [4] and 2001 [5]; Agar 1985 [30]; Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton 2008 [31]; Fidler and Cvrček 2018 [32]; and Kress and Hodge [33], among others. We aim to check for the overall content and agenda as well as consistency and fairness in treating topics that have been traditionally difficult to represent such as that of mining (see also [34–36]). In our case study, we identified strategies that enabled prioritizing financial values (that formed the real content of the reports) over social values (including care for people during the pandemic). Social values dominated the reports thematically and quantitatively but were, nevertheless, sidelined in reality. CDA led us to deconstruct the façade that the companies built in the reports, i.e., being both generators of shareholders’ income and employee benefactors. Textual organization, identification of topics and the visual appeal of the reports enabled directing consumers’ attention to “key values” the companies sought to foreground such as social and gender equality, diversity, alignment of drilling with modernity, safety and responsibility, sensitivity to social issues, etc., and away from the detrimental impact of mining and people exploitation.

Our analysis was directed primarily at the language used by company chairmen and spokesmen in the annual reports that managed to alter the reality of social responsibility and environmental protection (see [37,38]). We accounted for the ideology of mining natural resources and identified the central message foregrounded in the reports. We looked into the selection and distribution of key topics and an overall organization of the text, and examined the content of phraseology, concepts, keywords and descriptions. While paying particular attention to set phrases coining concepts dealing with mining and the register mediating the content, we counted keywords in selected sections of the reports as well as the entire documents assuming that any text can be characterized in terms of its prominent linguistic units (see [6,29,39]). Bertels and Speelman focus on ways to extract keywords from texts and evaluate them [40].

Furthermore, we noted the usage of numbers and “facts” and speculated about the range of functions of the language used in the discourse, i.e., to inform, deliver data, generate a positive emotional response, promote one’s activity and present a positive self-image. In the reports the ways of using language were aimed, above all else, to secure power over employees, alias “our people” and the communities providing them.

4. Results

4.1. CDA: Ideology

Ideology is created by internalizing values, maintaining attitudes, responding to social settings, aiming at social consent and thus supporting the very existence of companies, institutions or political regimes (see [5,30]) (In the paper, quotation marks are used to identify direct quotes and italics to identify words encapsulating recurrent concepts). It is internalized by the leadership and stakeholders, and externalized in their behaviors and discourse. The ideology backing up the annual reports is that mining is as an inevitable and progressive activity delivered on behalf of global populations. At the same time, it can be depended on for yielding “cash returns” for shareholders. It is built through the discourse of sustainability and upon the pretense of protecting natural resources by means of “responsible sourcing” necessary to guarantee people’s progress, enable economic “growth”, support social well-being of people and safeguard the future for humans. The activity of the companies has thus been ideologized as enhancing human progress, sustaining growth of the world population and opening up economic opportunities for poor and isolated communities. The logic supporting the provision is that the world population is growing and so are its energy needs as a consequence. This growth is supposedly inevitable, and the world cannot be imagined without it. The global pandemic during which the companies remained in operation did not alter the ideology but rather enhanced it.

The reports used language to conceptualize mining as a “safe and responsible management” of “human environment” and, at the same time, a “globally shared commitment”. The concept of mining was communicated through distinctive keywords such as *safety*, *responsibility*, *commitment*, *values*, *ownership*, *communication*, *management* and *respect*, among others. The discourse directed public attention to mining as an activity essential for world prosperity since sustaining the normalcy of civilized life. We considered problematic that this ideology was created by spokesmen of the mining industry with no participation from among the targeted populations and environments whose values have been ignored rather than respected. In the reports, the locals became “our people”, “traditional owners” and employees who were subjected to company rules and dependent on the mining business but who remained voiceless in decision making.

The ideology was evident in how the companies characterized themselves (e.g., being “sharply focused on value for shareholders and society”) and what key values they declared; the Rio Tinto company listed and defined *safety*, *integrity*, *teamwork*, *respect* and *excellence* ([2] p. 17), Glencore named *simplicity*, *responsibility*, *openness* and *entrepreneurialism*, in addition to *safety* and *integrity* (see the headings in the Glencore AR 2020, [1] p. 2), and BHP included *sustainability*, *performance* and *accountability*, in addition to *integrity* and *respect* (see the Ethics and Business conduct Section 1.7.5, BHP AR 2020, [3] p. 57). These values were made relevant to business, company or social domains and conceptualized through prominent keywords whose semantics were, however, opaque. Glencore’s self-promoting motto was a “responsible and ethical company with a positive culture” and its plan was “to responsibly source the commodities that advance everyday life for the benefit of the world”. Rio Tinto defined its activity by “efficiency, effectivity and sustainability”, and claimed its utmost priority as “creating value”. The process of this creation was said to be bounded by “respect for the environment, host countries and communities” (see Rio Tinto AR 2020, [2] p. 17). Rio Tinto promised “to produce materials essential for human progress . . . effectively and sustainably, creating value for all stakeholders while safeguarding the environment and respecting our host countries and communities”. The company displayed being strong in financial performance and safety culture, planned to “become

more caring" and "do better", and presented itself as leaders of "purpose-led business" that "produce materials essential for human progress . . . effectively and sustainably, creating value for all stakeholders while safeguarding the environment and respecting our host countries and communities" (the Chairman's Statement, Rio Tinto AR 2020, [2] p. 9). In the BHP report, the favored description of the company's activity was "strong", e.g., a "strong" culture of "safety" that responded "with pride" and "in a single voice" to the global pandemic. The reports responded "through measures and communications while keeping our operations running and continuing to deliver the products our customers need" (Rio Tinto, [2] p. 14), by means of a "strong" financial performance in the context of "challenging circumstances" and also sustainability that implied "safety", "financial performance" and "cultural sensitivity". In the statements, the unfavorable situation created by the pandemic was made to contrast with a display of values, plans, rigorous standards and an overall optimistic outlook. The reports offered a perception of serving as an engine and bridge "bringing people and resources together to build a better world" and "delivering strong cash returns" while believing that, ". . . our products will play an essential role in a decarbonizing world and will help us grow value for many decades to come" (BHP AR, [3] p. 4).

The reports contain hundreds of pages of texts, graphs, tables and photos that display attractively companies' business performance dedicated to highlighting financial success. They open with statements by the Chairmen and Chief Executives that acknowledge head-on the disaster of COVID-19 (in the Rio Tinto Report, the Juukan Gorge explosion was apologetically discussed on par with the pandemic, [2] pp. 7–14). Throughout the Reports, misfortunes are used to contrast with commercial success, ensuing disadvantage with upcoming opportunities and the year's losses with sustained gains: "As COVID-19 threatened lives and livelihoods, the entire company mobilized to safeguard our employees, contractors and communities, and to keep our operations running . . ." (Rio Tinto AR, [2] p. 6); and "Our strong performance in many areas in 2020 was overshadowed by the destruction of two ancient rock shelters in the Juukan Gorge" (Rio Tinto AR, [2] p. 62). Self-criticism and acknowledgement of guilt became the opportunity to put "the company at the best possible light" and praise "the talent and commitment of our employees, the quality of our assets and our contribution to society" (Rio Tinto AR, [2] p. 12). The text displayed consistently Rio Tinto's confidence in its values, virtues and benefits it brought to people, human progress it caused and praise-worthy activity it maintained: "The strength and resilience of our business enabled us protect thousands of jobs across our supply chain, continue to pay taxes and dividends to pension funds when many other companies were forced to cut back" (see Coombs 2007a, b [41,42]; Coombs and Holladay 2007 [43]).

The ideology of Glencore, BHP and Rio Tinto was a simile to that of other major mining corporations (for instance, the self-presentation motto of the International Council of Mining and Metals is, "The International Council on Mining and Metals is an international organisation dedicated to a safe, fair and sustainable mining and metals industry"). The Council claimed that all members adhered to "our Mining Principles, which incorporate comprehensive environmental, social and governance requirements, robust site-level validation of performance expectations and credible assurance of corporate sustainability reports with annual disclosure". Health and safety turned out to be an imminent priority along with innovations and strong performance. Similarly, the Association of Mining and Exploration Companies covering Australia claimed to be "a national association with a local focus" (International Council of Mining and Metals <https://www.icmm.com/> (accessed on 5 December 2021), is representing 35 mining companies around the globe. Health and safety priorities are here: <https://www.icmm.com/en-gb/health-and-safety> (accessed on 5 December 2021), Furthermore, Association of Mining and Exploration companies <https://www.amec.org.au/about-amec/meet-the-team> (accessed on 5 December 2021).

4.2. CDA: Mediating Meaning: The Language Strategies in Writing Annual Reports

CDA is a tool to reveal hidden, disguised and marginalized messages in texts that are intended to be institutionally representative. While depending on their ideology, the writers of annual reports used language strategically to support the company goals. They crafted the content by means of carefully chosen words, set phrases, metaphors, and sentential patterns mediating the content [6,39]. Following that, we pay attention to the language strategies that report writers employed while mediating the primary message of self-promotion, business success and public trust at the critical times of the pandemic. Innovative lexicon that the companies used let them reconceptualize mining so that it reflected their ideology and refocused shareholders' attention. The companies' primary strategies were usage of prominent keywords and relexicalizations of traditional meanings so that they became reader-friendly (see Cohen 2010 [44]; Fairclough 1989 [29], 1995 [24] and 2001 [25]; Nichols 2007 [45]; van Dijk 2008 [28]).

Table 1 lays out the critical factors and concepts affecting the meaning desired by the company reports. The ideological basis, textual context framing the financial data and various linguistic means mediate the content the reports deliver. The strategies of language usage consist of (1) foregrounding and sustaining the dominant message addressed to shareholders; (2) choosing and prioritizing relevant topics, numbers, facts and visuals; (3) depending on consistent use of keywords, slogans, phrases and collocations; and (4) relexicalizing the content by renaming familiar concepts. By relexicalizing, they sought to ameliorate the effect of the narrative and meanings represented through metaphors, euphemisms, newly coined terms and phrases so that the messages reached the target audience while safeguarding the institutional status and ideology. Table 1 summarizes the concepts and factors that turned out to be relevant in conducting CDA in the annual reports and shaping content of the documents.

Table 1. CDA factors and concepts.

Factors and Concepts	Company Application in the Reports
Ideology	To guarantee people's progress, enable economic "growth", support social well-being of people and safeguard human future.
Context	Mining during the COVID-19 pandemic
Key message	The pandemic is a challenge and we remain strong in managing it while delivering "products" and "values".
Topics	Values and concerns; financial returns; sustainability
Prominent keywords	Strategically used words aimed to sustain the ideology and the key message
Relexicalization	Word alternatives aimed to imperceptibly alter one's understanding of traditional meanings associated with the words

4.2.1. Foregrounding the Key Message

The central message of letters and statements from chairs and chief executive officers addressing shareholders and employees was transforming the detrimental crisis of the pandemic into a challenge and displaying resilience of the companies in dealing with it (see Hopper 1979 [46], Ehrlich 1987 [47], Abrahamson and Amir 1996 [37]). That the industry remained in operation during the global pandemic was presented as the evidence of one's invincibility and inevitability. It emphasized saving the world and local people who depended on the employers and whom the employers "proudly served" in return, and no pandemic could have ever changed that mission. The emphasis on saving and serving was aimed at enhancing legitimacy of the reports. While displaying their strength in sustaining activity and control over the situation, the companies declared themselves the managers in charge of the employees and communities who were evaluated as "vulnerable", defenseless and dependent. By their presence, financial support and protective measures during the pandemic the companies solidified their power as well as subordination of those depending

on them. At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis provided a memorable frame to provide detailed enumeration of financial reporting.

4.2.2. Selecting and Hiding Topics

The key values listed in the reports were intended to be evident in the treatment of the topics, i.e., (1) values and concerns (i.e., “company culture”, communities and people, and COVID-19 response), (2) financial returns, and (3) sustainability, including climate change. The topics were chosen and arranged with the addressees and reporting requirements in mind (see [16]). Although reporting on financial returns and steadfast operation supported by a detailed orderly display of financial data that spelled out strategies and included statistics was the primary purpose, financial reporting was preceded by lengthy reflections on social values, company culture, people care and the COVID-19 response, on the one hand, and sustainability requirements and climate change prerogatives, on the other. The reports sought to reassure the global community that people in “host communities” were cared for during the pandemic. However, the topic that remained hidden in the reports was an assessment of long-term ecological and cultural damage to the local and indigenous communities and environments, and company power over dependent populations living near the mining sites [23,24].

Aside from proving that they cared for people, the companies were also obliged to show that they mined in a safe and responsible manner. We focused on the values and concerns, i.e., the topic prioritized in all the three reports, analyzed strategies of embedding these values and concerns into the reports on financial performance, and discussed how the content was mediated by renaming familiar terms and repeating prominent keywords.

4.2.3. Repeating Keywords

Keywords are prominent linguistic units that characterize texts and stand out in terms of textual placement and frequency. In the statements of chairmen and executive officers the recurring keywords were the nouns *value/s*, *responsibility*, *management*, *operation*, *safety*, *culture*, *people/employees/communities*, *performance*, etc., collocating with adjectives in set phrases (e.g., “effective operations”, “financial returns”, “social values”). Among other prominent descriptions were the adjectives *strong*, *responsible*, *vulnerable*, *committed*, *social*, *dependable*, *effective*, *inclusive*, *global*, *respectful*, *rapid*, etc. Among the recurring verbs collocating with suitable nouns and adverbs, we identified *achieve*, *continue*, *develop*, *manage*, *perform*, et al. (e.g., *to achieve* typically collocated with “zero total emissions”).

The manual count has shown an overall agreement among the three companies in keyword usage throughout the entire documents; in all the reports, the prominent keywords (and related word forms, see Table 2) were *value*, *operation*, *management* (e.g., *risk management*), *performance* and *people/employees/communities*. Among the other prominent keywords, the count identified *community*, *communication*, *commitment* (e.g., “commitment to protect the safety and health of the people in host communities”, “commitment to the safety” or “health protection measures”), *safety*, *partnership*, *diversity*, *relationship*, *awareness*, *trust*, *integrity*, *(teamwork) respect*, *integrity*, *(inclusive) operation*, *responsibility* and *excellence*. In all the reports the prominent keywords related to the social domain a priori (e.g., *values*, *safety*, *communication*, *commitment*, *partnership*). Social values and concerns were, however, referred to throughout the sections on financial returns and sustainability as well (e.g., “social investment funds”).

Relative to the total word count, the five most prominent keywords (including word forms) in the individual documents were, in descending order, in Rio Tinto (22,000 words in total) *people* et al., *operation*, *performance*, *management* and *value*; in Glencore (35,500 words in total) *people/employees/communities*, *value*, *management*, *operation* and *performance*; in BHP (72,200 words in total) *operation*, *people/employees/communities*, *performance*, *value/s* and *management*. These keywords occurred in predictable and stable collocations (e.g., nouns paired with descriptive adjectives, or verbs paired with descriptive adverbs).

Furthermore, we have identified 40 most frequent keywords (counted together with their derivatives) that circulated in the sections on social values and concerns (contrary to our expectation, the keywords *COVID* and *sustainability* did not appear among the most frequently used keywords). In Table 3, the keywords are listed along with illustrative examples of collocations revealing contextual usage of the keywords.

Table 2. PROMINENT KEYWORDS, counted in the entire documents.

	Glencore	Rio Tinto	BHP
Value/s/ed	430	510	610
Safety/safe	100	320	220
Perform/ance	290	650	740
Operation/s/al	370	700	980
Manage/ment	420	650	610
Strategy/ies/	260	340	430
People/'s/s,	60	140	230
employee/s or	130	440	430
community/ies ¹	340	120	280
Challenge	60	60	50
Respond/se/ible/ibility	210	310	230

Source: Own investigation. ¹ People/'s/s, employee/s and community/ies are counted together and considered synonymous for the purpose of the analysis.

Table 3. KEYWORDS in the sections on social values and concerns.

		Glencore		Rio Tinto		BHP	
		No	%	No	%	No	%
1	Respond/se/ible: effective and rapid, targeted, rapid, global and technologically savvy, monitored, managed response	121	34%	27	12%	70	9%
2	Operation/s: inclusive operation, uneconomic o., effective and robust o.	119	34%	74	34%	382	53%
3	Management: risk management, water m.; managing fatigue and stress, m. the spreading virus	94	26%	32	15%	203	28%
4	Performance: strong p., social p., continual p., p. and accountability, p. and delivery	87	25%	65	29%	199	28%
5	Develop/ment: socioeconomic d. in the countries where we operate	83	23%	40	18%	209	29%
6	Community/ies: contribute to c., support c., protect c.; host c., vulnerable c., remote and regional indigenous c.	79	22%	58	26%	126	17%
7	Strategy/ic/ies: our s., climate s., s. for sustainable future, engagement s., s. in partnership w. stakeholders	74	21%	73	33%	146	20%
8	Continue: c. the dialogue, c. to drive, c. to prioritize, c. to implement . . .	65	18%	54	24%	200	28%
9	Value and social value/s: delivered v., responded to COVID through s. v., s. v. embedded in the business plan	65	18%	44	20%	199	28%
10	Impact/s: collateral i., manage COVID i., i. of net zero emissions, i. on employees and nearby communities	60	17%	31	14%	248	34%
11	Increase: debit i., i. indigenous leadership	50	14%	38	17%	121	17%
12	COVID: response to c., impact of c., increased engagement due to c., effects of c.	49	14%	29	13%	136	19%

Table 3. Cont.

		Glencore		Rio Tinto		BHP	
		No	%	No	%	No	%
13	Opportunity/ies: o. to reduce risks	48	14%	17	8%	11	20%
14	Engage/ment: e. strategies, e. and disclosure, stakeholder e., e. with employees, direct e. with our workforce, respectful and effective e., direct leader e.	47	13%	16	7%	50	7%
15	People: our people, indigenous p., integrating p.	45	13%	38	17%	174	24%
16	Sustainability: integrating s., governance and s., s. framework, s. report, s. strategy, s. highlights, s. principles, s. risk areas	43	12%	18	8%	174	24%
17	Commitment: c. to protect the safety and health, c. to the safety, c. to our culture, c. to stakeholders	41	12%	12	5%	48	7%
18	Safe/ty, to save: implement s., complex issues of s., challenges of s., keeping people s. and healthy, improved hygiene s., rapid screening s., s. and security, wellbeing s.	35	10%	41	19%	72	10%
19	Improve/ments: i. feedback, i. to minimize operating costs, i. practices and address risks	34	10%	23	10%	98	14%
20	Partner/ship: creating p., strong p., success depends on p.	32	10%	50	23%	80	11%
21	Concern/s: c. about fatigue and work-life balance	30	8%	6	3%	13	2%
22	Strong: s. partnership, s. balance sheet, s. relationships, s. financial performance	30	8%	45	20%	40	6%
23	Respect/ful: teamwork r., r. for cultural heritage	28	8%	19	9%	44	6%
24	Practices: preventive p., improve p., human rights p., transparent business p., best p., ethical business p.	27	8%	5	1%	27	4%
25	Measures: adopting m., testing and preventive m., performance m.	27	8%	19	9%	44	6%
26	Priority/ies/ize: strategic p., p. investments, p. for our human resources, to understand local p.	27	8%	16	7%	47	7%
27	Diversity/fy/fied/fication: Bio-d., strong because of our d., d. outcomes, d. update, d. objectives	24	7%	12	5%	68	9%
28	Resources: adjusted r., r. as contribution, natural r.	22	6%	9	4%	74	10%
29	Relationship/relate/relations: r. with communities/stakeholders	21	6%	19	9%	75	10%
30	Initiatives: i. focused on prevention	19	5%	3	1%	31	4%
31	Remain: r. focused and connected, r. fit-for-purpose	18	5%	13	6%	55	7%
32	Challenge/s: c. of meeting global demand, unprecedented c. of COVID-19, c. in regions that host our operations, c. to think differently	18	5%	10	5%	33	5%
33	Awareness: cultural a., build a., focus on a.	16	5%	5	2%	5	0%
34	Success/full: s. efforts, create s.	16	5%	10	5%	36	5%
35	Diversity: d. in leadership, d. policy	16	4%	10	5%	53	7%
36	Aligned: a. with administrative directives of the community	15	4%	3	1%	13	2%

Table 3. Cont.

		Glencore		Rio Tinto		BHP	
		No	%	No	%	No	%
37	Integrity: act with i., honesty and i., i. of the statements, i. of the process, the criteria include ethics and i.	10	3%	3	1%	27	4%
38	Communication/te: improve c., modernize c., innovate c., improve ability to communicate with locals	10	3%	1	0%	11	2%
39	Excellence: operational e., commercial e.	3	1%	8	4%	18	2%
40	Trust: t. that has been lost, t. placed in us	3	1%	16	7%	12	2%

Source: Own investigation. In the GLENCORE annual report we selected the sections Chairman's introduction, CEO review, Strategy for sustainable future, Climate change, Performance, Performance indicators, Stakeholder engagement, Our People, Sustainability, Ethics and Compliance, Financial review, Decades of recycling expertise, Our marketing business, Market review and outlook, [1] pp. 1–70, i.e., 35,488 words. In the RIO TINTO AR, we selected the sections Strategic report, Chairman's Statement, Juukan Gorge, Chief Executive's Statement, Our Business Model, Our Values, Our Stakeholders, Strategic Context, Our Strategy, Key Performance Indicators, Chief Financial Officer's Statement, Financial Review, Portfolio Management, [2] pp. 1–40, i.e., 22,061 words. In the BHP AR, we selected the sections Strategic report, Chair's Review, CEO's Report, BHP at a glance: FY2020, Performance, Our operating environment, Capability and culture, Sustainability, Samarco, Portfolio: Our business, Summary of financial performance, Performance by commodity, Other information, [3] pp. 1–108, i.e., 72,209 words. Notes: The root of the word is expressed in bold. Associated forms and collocations are added in plain text. The percentage column is expressed in italics and it is calculated by multiplying the number of occurrences of each keyword by one hundred and dividing the result by the total word count of the selected section (e.g., for the percentage of the keyword "Respond/se/ible" in the Glencore AR the calculation was $121 \times 100/35,488 = 0.3409$, i.e., 34%). The 10 most frequent words in the Glencore AR are marked in red, in the Rio Tinto AR in orange and in the BHP AR in blue. Overlaps were numerous. The keywords occurring in all the three reports, i.e., *operation*, *performance*, *develop*, *strategy*, *continue* and *value* were included as well.

4.2.4. Managing the Selected Topics by Relexicalizing the Content

Carefully constructed lexical collocations and sentential patterns mediated the content in the three reports. A salient strategy of disguising the company's activity was redirecting one's attention to the polished surface of mining presented as *desirable*, *admirable*, *beneficial* and *inevitable*. Naming/coining concepts central to the topic, renaming the common and stale content through innovative lexicon to embellish the field (e.g., local people and employees as "Traditional Owners"), relexicalizing familiar words by dressing them up with altered meanings (e.g., *value* used in diverse contexts whose meaning was meant to be self-evident although in reality it remained obscured), using euphemisms (e.g., *creating value* for 'making money') and depending on recurrence of set phrases and prominent keywords (e.g., *performance*), have been the trusted strategies employed to transform and ameliorate the reality and effects of the mining industry (see [22,48] for impression management).

At the same time, renaming, euphemizing and using clever lexical collocations enabled estrangement and distancing not only from the mining activity but also the people and cultures most directly affected by mining. Thus, the very concept of *mining* was renamed into "sourcing responsibly", *mining company* into "a natural resource company" and *mining the commodities* into "sourcing the commodities". To put a positive spin on the destructive action of mining, *natural resources* were turned into "a commodity that advances everyday life", as freely accessible and waiting to be used up. Although meanings gained by means of renaming pretend to be self-evident (since they are mediated through familiar words), they are ambiguous and unclear. In order to redirect one's perception and alter the original meanings, they relexicalize what is commonly understood and could be said simply and plainly. The desired and cumulative effect of the refurbished lexicon is a change in one's mental representation of the activity and its agents [4,5]. Examples of renaming the content of words and phrases are given throughout the analysis of the three topics and in particular, the topic social values and concerns.

Topic 1: Relexicalizing Values and Concerns at the Time of COVID-19

Although the side effect of “safe operations”, “business values” and “financial returns” has been subordination and exploitation of Indigenous and other local communities, the mining companies have, nevertheless, managed to build the discourse of their presence being socially beneficial to the communities and create an image of local benefactors for themselves. “social values” and care of people, communities, employees and shareholders not only frame and introduce the reports where they serve as a cover-up for financial power but also dominate the entire narrative (see Table 4 for examples of frequent relexicalizations). All the reports detail the mechanics of the COVID-19 response, controls and protocols that were instituted (e.g., travel restrictions, social distancing, increased personal hygiene, managing fatigue and stress) and measures taken to manage the spreading virus (such as “rapid screening to reduce risks of transmission to vulnerable communities near our operation”). The goal is to let the shareholders know that “social values are embedded in the business plan” (RT AR). Aside from “making profit”, the companies rationalize continuous operation by continuing “to contribute to communities and economies” and “to support” them. The companies show that they have taken upon themselves the role of benefactors protecting communities, being engaged in benevolent activities and preventing disasters befalling upon people “hosting” them (Effectively, the benefits cause a split of communities into the employed and the jobless, the talented, young, ambitious and the complacent. The very language addressing people, employees and communities causes fractioning of their identity and subordination. The favored participants who engaged actively with the companies obtained privileges and means to provide short-term support to the community and families, and to enter the global world of their employers without becoming aware of occupying subordinate positions. At the same time, the company engagement distances them from their neighbors who belong only to the local rather than global world).

Table 4. Additional examples of renaming in the social domain.

Intended Meaning	vs. Meaning Altered by Renaming/Relexicalizing
working in teams	collaborating for success
respecting the others	embracing openness
employing women and the indigenous	fostering inclusion, embracing/caring about diversity, integrating operation
doing a good job	being the best we can be for superior performance
communities living near the mines	people hosting the companies
natural assets of local communities	world-class assets, global assets
people of the land with natural resources	Traditional Owners of assets
natural resources	our world-class assets
employing local people	building relationships

Source: Own investigation.

By discussing frequent usage of *values* and *safety* in various collocations, we show how the companies align company values with local values to display commitment and assume responsibility, and thus *legitimize* their own presence. According to the legitimacy theory, companies seek “to gain or restore organizational legitimacy by seemingly aligning the firm’s norms and values with that of society, particularly in situation where firms face legitimacy threats. Firms engage in symbolic management to give the impression that their activities are congruent with society’s norms and values” [22]. Their values are also chosen to resonate with shareholders’ expectations that are partial to the business discourse of “smart management”. The COVID-19 crisis thus became an opportunity to display initiatives demonstrating ingenuity and the pioneering spirit for which the companies have been supposedly known. It also established a context for a self-advertising campaign

whose promises and suggestions appeared legitimate and in line with the discourse of diversity and integration.

Due to the disaster of blowing up the caves used by local communities as places of worship, the Rio Tinto report admitted that it was necessary to “improve approach to communities and stakeholders globally” and embed “a more inclusive approach that strengthened our overall thinking” in order to become “more in tune with the world we serve” ([2] pp. 13, 14, 22) (The data gathered through in-group communication revealed both the locals’ shock over the monuments’ destruction (to which the company responded by apologizing and admitting a need for a stronger focus on cultural heritage) and their pride in working for Rio Tinto, at the same time. The destruction became an important component not only of Rio Tinto’s remorse but also its self-advertising presentation [49]). The company stressed that they would “elevate our approach to social performance, including respect for cultural heritage” and “engage respectfully and effectively with “Traditional Owners” and other “First Nations groups”. Rio Tinto’s response to COVID-19 permeated the entire Report. The pandemic was presented as an unforeseeable challenge that the company “managed” while ensuring continued growth and “delivering value” in spite of COVID-19 costs and the reduction of prices that the crisis caused across the board. Above all, Rio Tinto pointed out to have managed an effective and rapid response to COVID-19 without needing to furlough any employees without pay. The company claimed their ability to turn the crisis into an opportunity to “improve communications”, “modernize”, “innovate”, “accelerate and expand our digital solutions”, and “be at the forefront of coordinating international efforts” (Rio Tinto made evident its awareness of how difficult the lives of employees and communities became, due to the experience with the cave disaster). It evaluated the response strategy as “clear and nimble using a hierarchy of controls to manage the risks and keep people safe”. Although resources had to be “adjusted” and “controls instituted to minimize the risks” and “keep people safe and healthy”, the Report unambiguously highlighted that the company managed the operations so that they could run safely and smoothly, generate cash flow and retain stable production. Rio Tinto report acknowledged the fact that COVID-19 significantly altered the ways of working and traditional ways of engaging with employees. The report addressed the needs of “people” and employees ([2] p. 75) by prioritizing “commitment to the safety” and employee well-being, compared the challenge and impact of COVID-19 to financial crisis and focused on reducing the “risk of transmission from our employees to the remote and vulnerable communities near our operations”, “social distancing” and “care for vulnerable people in isolated communities” by limiting contact with employees (Rio Tinto, [2] pp. 11, 15–16).

Throughout the reports, the concept of taking care of “our” people at the time of the COVID-19 virus pandemics became interrelated with that of company operations and mediated through verbal collocations such as “adopting measures”, “innovating the technology”, “maintaining social distance” and “taking responsibility”. The companies turned the COVID-19 “challenge” into an “opportunity” (e.g., “The crisis challenges us to think differently”) and highlighted its success of innovating ways to “remain connected”, for instance, by “conducting focus groups” (to listen to employees), introducing “direct leader engagement” and “employee assistance program” (to better support people), “deploying surveys”, implementing “safety”, “testing” and “preventive measures”, and offering “mental health training and counseling”. Employee consultation was deemed to be “transparent, inclusive and culturally appropriate” (see also Hooghiemstra 2000) [50]. For instance, the Glencore created a Community Support Fund to show “commitment” and protect safety and health of the people in their “host communities” during the pandemic, and also collected statistics, conducted webinars and implemented “health protection measures”. In the Glencore report, the term *values* collocated commonly with “priorities and beliefs” and referred to “safety, integrity, simplicity, responsibility, openness and entrepreneurialism” being the concepts central to both the social and environmental domains.

Discussion of the COVID-19 situation was typically mediated through “measures”, “preventive practices” and “management” in the reports. The pandemic was mostly

referred to as a *challenge* and thus understood as something to be overcome, and one in which they managed to overcome. In its 2020 annual report, Glencore described COVID-19 as a challenge to which the company responded quickly in order to support and protect their people and communities. Glencore reported difficult decisions at operations assessed as “uneconomic” and admitted their “collateral impact” on employees and communities suggesting that local employees were let go to sustain business and satisfy stakeholders, i.e., Glencore “managed the COVID impact” so that operations could remain “effective and robust”. It “reacted appropriately” while adhering to its standards and “strategic priorities”.

Similarly, BHP reported that steps of supporting local communities that “rely on our business” during the pandemic helped to “keep our operated assets running safely”. It detailed “initiatives focused on prevention”, “covering up pay” where people were removed from jobs and concern about proximity of Indigenous people. The report described the response to COVID-19 as *targeted, rapid, global* and *technologically savvy*, monitored and managed through teams and “advanced communication tools”. The response consisted of providing finances to establish funds “to support hospitals, clinics and public health organizations serving the communities surrounding Australian operations”, mentoring programs and campaigning for sanitation to reach out to “vulnerable communities” and securing IT equipment for an Aboriginal corporation, for instance. BHP has operated in close proximity to several remote and regional Indigenous communities globally. Despite developing “leadership skills of Indigenous employees” and addressing “barriers” to career progression of the employees, the discourse sidelined the values of local cultures that were not interconnected with company values and careers. The company focused on Indigenous populations that were turned into employees and became committed to local mining. While responding to the COVID-19 crisis, the BHP report noted “social distancing” and isolation of Indigenous communities that were recognized as “vulnerable” and “particularly susceptible to COVID-19”, and responded in a “supportive and coordinated” manner. However, the critical point is that describing the communities as vulnerable and particularly susceptible rendered them weak and dependent on the mining companies.

Both Rio Tinto and BHP used the term “traditional owners” to rename people near the companies and their employees (Rio Tinto showed 73 occurrences and BHP 185 occurrences of the term). According to the discourse, they owned the assets and, subsequently, the companies desired to “strengthen partnership” with them. Due to the “partnership”, indigenous people would become proud and faithful employees aligned culturally with company values and sharing its perspective on mining, which interviewing them supposedly revealed. In the BHP discourse, local communities depended on business of the company that in turn assumed the responsibility of sustaining its operations throughout the crisis. The company promised to “increase the economic benefits that flow to their communities from employment, skills, training and business development”. The Owners supposedly “recognize the social and economic benefits that mining brings to their communities” but are “concerned” about relationships and “indicated that traditional agreements have not met the aspirations of partnership”. The reports failed to mention that the companies caused dependence of the local owners and communities on the mining industry and deprived them of the freedom of choice and cultural maintenance.

Rio Tinto articulated plans to create an Indigenous Advisory Group in order to “accelerate the career development of Indigenous Australians in our business” and create “a more inclusive work culture”. To create an “inclusive work culture”, the report followed equal employment discourse in which it promised to “develop our leaders’ cultural awareness, through training and diversity in leadership”, “improve ability to communicate with locals”, “increase Indigenous leadership” and “improve the representation of women”. “Creating partnerships” and “integrating” people became the terms aimed to entail that places in company management would be reserved for local employees. This discourse and the talk of equal rights, social mobility and diversity could serve to legitimize company activities but would hardly resonate with values of local communities.

Topic 2: Relexicalizing Financial Returns and Company Values

All the companies claimed to prosper for the sake of their stakeholders and employees with the goal to secure financial returns benefitting them. The Rio Tinto summarized the strategy backing up its activity as creating “superior, sustainable value for shareholders, in partnership with stakeholders, by meeting customers’ needs, maximizing cash from world-class assets and allocating capital with discipline” ([2] p. 22). However, doing business in order to yield a major profit from mining was relexicalized as *resourcing host communities*, mining the commodities as *sourcing the commodities*, mining company as a *natural resource company* and the mining business as *operations, resources, progress, values, assets, investments, cash flow, financial returns, activities*, etc. (additional examples of relexicalization are provided in Table 5). To put a positive spin on the destructive action, natural resources were turned into “a commodity that advances everyday life”.

Table 5. Additional examples of renaming in the financial domain.

Original Meaning	Relexicalized Meaning
making money	creating superior, sustainable value
earning cash by mining	producing sustainable value
delivering cash	meeting customers’ needs
making big profit	providing superior cash returns
distributing financial gains in an orderly way	allocating capital with discipline
financial earnings	strong performance and cash returns
reasonable financial allocation	resilient commodity portfolio
	strong balance sheet
natural resources	our world-class assets
investors’ gains	cash returns
render communities economically dependent	contribute to local economies
provide jobs, cash and education to people	contribute to communities and economies

Source: Own investigation.

The companies claimed to have recognized global issues and problems as well as geopolitical, social and technological complexity of today’s world (Rio Tinto AR, [2] p. 20). While they could not respond to all its needs, they have been able “to provide superior cash returns to shareholders” because they operated with “world-class assets” and a “very strong balance sheet” ([2] (p. 29). The strategy to meet the mining challenge was relexicalized as *a globally shared commitment* aimed at meeting company values and financial goals, satisfying stakeholders and ensuring their continued investments. They detailed financial measures and performance to acknowledge that the trade flow was disrupted by COVID-19 restrictions and supply disruptions, which severely impacted the demand, but the company’s resilience was supposedly demonstrated by its continual performance and delivery. The BHP report followed the tune and emphasized *continuity, reliability, continued growth, cash return and community support*. The prominently used nouns of *performance, management or value*, etc., were typically described by adjectives such as *superior, resilient, financial, effective, empowered, positive, strong, responsible, sustainable or safe*.

Topic 3: Relexicalizing Sustainability and Climate Change

Sustainability and climate change go hand in hand and occupy a focal spot in the reports. They are presented primarily as a social concern that implies caring for needs of the world by reducing emissions, decarbonizing, investing in technologies and setting new goals related to emissions from product shipping (“operating in a sustainable manner”, “resourcing” or “sourcing responsibly”, mining as “sustainable, responsible or inclusive operation”). All the companies address the critical topic of climate change. Sustainability is

presented as integrated throughout mining activities and incorporated into decision making and operation planning that address “social values” in order to enable the company remaining sustainable (see also Hakala) [51]. To comply with sustainability prerogatives, growth and growing business are qualified as “sustainable” (e.g., “sustainable business” or “grow stakeholder returns sustainably”) (Notably, the CDA questions the reality of “sustainable growth” and classifies the phrase as an oxymoron; economic growth is costly and depletes resources, no matter how sustainable it is claimed to be (Eckert and Kovalevska 2021) [52]. While Report writers welcome “growing energy needs” as an unquestionable reality, critics of sustainability point out that energy needs of the populations will grow throughout the world, and in particular in countries such as China or India. However, they should be curbed rather than satisfied to save the planet. This sort of criticism endangers ambition and future plans of mining companies and stakeholders; sustainability remains the mantra of mining that acknowledges the environmental crisis). Consequently, in the business of mining, sustainability generates concern for mining emissions, “development of breakthrough low-carbon technologies” and “decarbonization with the goal of net zero emissions from the shipping of products”. For instance, the Rio Tinto report places major emphasis in its discourse on the “work on decarbonization”, “investment in technologies” and emissions goals. Glencore emphasizes the goal of becoming a “leader in enabling decarbonization of energy usage”, “decarbonizing [our own] operational footprint” and “reducing total emissions footprint” with the goal to achieve a “net zero total emissions footprint”. It claims to support the goal of the Paris Agreement and to be “aligned” with it while “driving [our] business forward”, nevertheless, which seems incompatible. Mining strategies of the companies are thus placed into the context of sustainability, cultural heritage and local economy. The stories of the year highlight recycling and net zero emissions in the Reports. The challenge identified by Glencore, Rio Tinto as well as BHP is “meeting the increasing energy needs of a growing population while radically reducing its energy footprint”. However, this challenge appears incompatible with reducing the footprint.

Table 6 lists prominent collocations of *sustainable* and *sustainability* and reveals the absurdity of the linguistic collocations that ensued.

Table 6. Prominent and recurrent collocations of sustainable and sustainability.

Sustainable:	<i>future, goal, operation, mining activities, decision making, growth, business, role in economy, supply chains, economic developments, returns for business, use of the resource, group-sustainable development, change, solutions, benefits, practices, long-term returns, long-term profitability, increases in crop-yields, global ecosystem, relationships, success, value, communities, natural environment, productivity, improvement, maintenance, outcomes, standards, power sources, increases, cash flow, production, construction materials, water use, etc.; remaining sustainable as a company</i>
Sustainably:	<i>grow stakeholder returns s., manage the land s., mining coexists s., reducing footprint s., develop s., source aluminium s.</i>

Source: Own investigation.

5. Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

Professional organizations and councils involved in the mining and exploration industry are setting up standards with regard to corporate reporting, environmental impact, and health and safety worldwide. The associations take commitments implied in the Paris Agreement seriously and set up goals regarding environmental impact. Moreover, they seek to cope with health and safety measures as well as the elimination of fatalities. Associations emphasize cultivating relations with local communities. Nevertheless, relevant and publicly available documentation has not been concerned with COVID-19 directly since it was created prior to the pandemic and has been followed since then. Thus, responsibilities are understood as voluntary commitments in the hands of specific mining corporations. Forcing these giants to respect regulations has been difficult, especially when operating in legally underdeveloped regions.

COVID-19 became the means to empower the company rather than the reason to serve the people, the means to display one’s power and strength rather than to empower people and employees. The content analysis revealed that the mining companies not only

perceived the crisis as an opportunity to innovate and reclaim their leadership in global economy but also to use the social context of the pandemic to advertise their benevolent activities. Not only were they taking special care of their employees and “greening” their business at the time of the crisis but they also presented mining as the sort of business that was necessary to maintain for the sake of human progress. By “managing” the crisis, they became the elite contributing to social prosperity and global good. By “supporting mutual communication” and “partnership”, they cultivated that perception in the employees. The reports viewed COVID-19 as a challenge, crisis and danger that called for safety measures, strategies, modified employee management and enhanced communication. They highlighted engagement and claimed commitment and responsibility, while detailing employee protection and safety. But their cultural distance made it impossible to account for how communities managed in their environments during the crisis. The companies promised to increase their cultural knowledge and amplify being technologically savvy in their public outreach. Community involvement that the companies proclaimed and displayed in various “measures” and policies “protecting vulnerable communities” served to frame impressive financial statements that in turn generated a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in the stakeholders. In reality, the mining companies used the crisis of COVID-19 to increase dependence of local people on mining.

In 2020, the mining companies approached annual reporting as advertising their success and strength. The threat of COVID-19 and response to it framed financial reports in a new way and managed to present the gains as legitimate because business engagement was presented as balanced out by engagement with people in crisis. In sum, first, the mining companies used the pandemic to display their invincibility, courage and power, and advance their reputation as hard-working, benevolent, resilient and compassionate. Second, by intensifying communication, partnership and relationships with locals, they increased people’s dependence on jobs, benefits, provisions, opportunities and social safety. Third, in their discourse they emphasized mining as an inevitable endeavor but failed to address the long-term effect of sustaining the intensity of mining in relation to the needs of the “global population” (Of note, the socially sensitive industry represented by the mining companies has been scrutinized, criticized and attacked by ecological activists for destroying the living environment of the people employed and for ignoring the consequences of the destruction).

CDA data show that goals of the companies have remained unaltered in 2020. CDA made it evident that concepts, keywords, collocations and set phrases endorsed the agenda of mining companies as caring and successful institutions that ensured legitimate progress for the sake of the people they employed, global population and the environment (see Elsbach and Sutton 1992 [12]). The report writers showed themselves as skilled and competent in how they used language to defend the ideology, discuss relevant topics and foreground the central message, and thus render the reports credible and professional. The pandemic became the platform to highlight the companies’ prosperity, technological savvy, humanitarian ambition, financial success and communication acumen. These qualities have supposedly distinguished the companies as vigilant, resilient and responsible since they withstood adversarial conditions of the pandemic. But COVID-19 has remained. We recommend that continuous cooperation with local communities on a sophisticated level continues to be explored. We further recommend tracking the topics and strategies and checking for possible shifts in the strategies and goals in the 2021 Reports. Follow-up research should reveal how local communities managed in their environments during the crisis, whether they received institutional support and whether ecological activism reported on effects of mining by the companies. Finally, we plan to look further into ecological modernization and find out whether its benefits could become compatible with mining in the near future.

We question whether the companies will indeed intensify the social engagement they foregrounded in the 2020 reports. For now, we suggest that their self-confident discourse was aimed to align with the stakeholders’ business power while hiding social and cultural damage caused by encouraging people’s dependence on mining. In the report

presentations, the true social upheavals created by the 2020 pandemic turned out to be secondary in importance. Their revealed message was to remain in the limelight and move on. The hidden one was to continue to exploit local people and resources, no matter what the crisis.

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