

An NGO's report on pollution and its effects in the Vaal Triangle

*The GroundWork Report 2006: Poisoned spaces manufacturing wealth,
producing poverty*

Dawid Hallowes and Victor Munnik

groundWork, Pietermaritzburg, October 2006

ISBN 0620374527

Reviewed by Johann Tempelhoff

North-West University

Since the beginning of the twentieth century the Vaal Triangle epitomised the Janus-face of South Africa's industrial revolution. On the one hand the coalmining town of Vereeniging (founded 1892) was home to one of the environmentally friendly infrastructure industries of the bustling and booming Witwatersrand. The Rand Water Board had an impressive purification plant here, that was used to provide the greater part of what is Gauteng today, with ample supplies of potable water.

On the other hand there was South Africa's first iron and steel factory, the Union Steel Corporation of South Africa (USCO) that had been founded in 1911, also in Verreeniging. In close proximity of the local coalfields and abundant water supplies a number of power stations started generating electricity that was relayed up to the Witwatersrand, some 70 km away.

In the 1940s Vanderbijlpark, the home of parastatal Iron and Steel Corporation of South Africa (Iscor) brought a period of rapid growth to the Vaal Triangle. In 1950 followed the fuel from coal plant of Sasol on the other side of the Vaal River at the newly founded town of Sasolburg. Somehow the environmental beauty (the Vaal River) and the beast (industries responsible for toxic pollution in the air and the river's water) have existed side by side ever since.

Apart from becoming an important hub in South Africa's industrial development, the Vaal Triangle, comprising the urban settlements of Meyerton, Vereeniging, Vanderbijlpark and Sasolburg also boasted

the questionable reputation of being one of the most polluted regions of South Africa.

The prevailing state of affairs has given rise to a commitment by the non-governmental organisation (NGO) groundwork in the form of its annual report for 2006 to shed some light on the manner in which the environmental conditions are affecting the everyday lives of society in the region.

As the title outlines, the objective is to explain how exploitative industrial activities have been the major cause of producing wealth, for some and abject poverty for the majority of the region's residents. A number of activist organisations joined forces and provided Victor Munnik and his fellow author David Hallows with some haunting insights of life in the Vaal Triangle.

The study has a strong social historical inclination. Apart from a number of very firmly entrenched peoples' history perspectives on the evolution of industrial development in the region, there is also a firm accent on the environmental history of industrialisation. The work does a new South African approach to societal problems justice in that the reader is provided with substantial information on how people in the informal settlements and the former apartheid townships of the region eke out a living.

Many of the theories of exploitation and pollution are based on international theories that have proliferated in environmental struggles in many parts of the developing world. There are some interesting insights on the way in which the energy industry tends to exploit locally and then invest externally. Perhaps the more important part of the study is a comprehensive overview of the Mittal iron and steel factory at Vanderbijlpark, and its history of polluting the waters of the Vaal River. Comprehensive attention is given to the Steel Valley crisis that saw a truly 'international' protest against the then Iscor at the time of the World Summit on Sustainable development that was held in Johannesburg in 2002. It is a courageous study. No stone is left untouched to explain how the interaction of factors of capital and injustice have historically contributed to a state of affairs that has left the texture or human dignity faltering in a South Africa where democracy is celebrated from political platforms and all too often elementary aspects of human rights ignored in the processes of industrial production. The NGO groundwork, and its partners deserve brownie points for relating the story of an environmental crisis and its implications in such a forthright manner.