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PHOTO: SIMPHIWE MBOKAZI

Bench Marks releases damning report on steel company

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THE HEALTH and safety of employees at ArcelorMittal South Africa's (Amsa) Vanderbijlpark plant has deteriorated and the environmental and the housing conditions for the surrounding communities are deplorable.

These are some of the damning findings of a study conducted by Bench Marks Foundation, a non-profit organisation that focuses on keeping local corporations on their toes.

The study, which is titled *Steel at Any Cost: A community voice perspective on the impacts of Arcelor-Mittal's operations in Vanderbijlpark, South Africa, Policy Gap 8*, was launched publicly during a press conference yesterday.

It has noted unfair labour and environmental practices by the steel giant at its Vanderbijlpark plant, claims which South Africa's biggest steel maker has denied.

In its response, Amsa said that pollution at its operations was under control, safety of employees

was a priority and it had a comprehensive social responsibility programme focusing on health, social development and education.

The company said that it had spent about R30 million replacing the roofs of about 3 000 households in Bophelong and Boipatong in the past four years. It had spent R1 billion towards environmental upgrades at its plants in the past five years, of which the lion's portion was at Vanderbijlpark.

In addition, it said dust emissions were at their lowest at its Vereeniging works, following the installation of a dust extraction systems in 2010.

The report comes after the courts ordered Amsa to hand over to the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance its environmental plan on the rehabilitation of its Vaal disposal site, where it is allegedly illegally dumping hazardous waste.

John Capel, Bench Mark's executive director, yesterday went as far as calling for the government to review Amsa's mining licence for ignoring the environmental impact

of the plants, and as a result it will push for a boycott of the company's products.

"We are hoping that government can say to Amsa it is either you respect our code of conduct or your mining licence will be reviewed. We are hoping that the level of pollution, injuries and illness will be reduced," Capel said.

According to the study, Amsa scores very low when it comes to creating a safe environment for its employees, and it cites how two employees died in 2011 after allegedly inhaling gas. In the report, an employee claims that every week there is a worker dying in the company, but Amsa does not want such information to be leaked to outsiders.

Amsa has denied the allegation.

"The company has not recorded a fatal accident in more than two years and incidences of injuries have dropped significantly. As a company, we take special care to ensure that our employees work in an environment that is safe and

injury free," Amsa said.

The report blames Amsa for refusing to admit liability towards sick employees thereby it has evaded compensation for treating employees who have contracted illnesses including TB and hearing loss.

Bench Marks blamed Amsa for its destruction of the Vereeniging area and for paying lip service to its corporate social responsibility.

The report, which was conducted in 2010, was derived from interviews with 140 respondents and focus groups from affected communities. It included no scientific data.

Asked for scientific evidence and figures, Capel said: "We are not here for statistics, but human life."