

Catholic Approaches to Mining: Cases of Impact

The Tampakan Copper-Gold Mine Project, Diocese of Marbel, Philippines

Municipality of Tampakan, South Cotabato Province, Mindanao, Philippines

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Summary

Since the publication of the landmark pastoral letter in 1988, “What is Happening to our Beautiful Land?,” the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has played a critical role in communities’ resistance to destructive mining activities. After describing statements of the CBCP with regard to the ecological consequences of mining over the last three decades, the case study examines the actions taken by the Social Action Centre of the Diocese of Marbel with regard to the one of the largest copper-gold sites in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. Since the start of exploration activities in 2003, the Church has supported the mobilisation of local communities to prevent ecological damage. It has been a key actor in a successful ban on open-pit mining in the South Cotabato Province, and in documenting human rights violations in the region. As of April 2026, the mining company, Sagittarius Mines, Inc. (SMI), has not been able to begin commercial mining operations in Tampakan. The case study highlights the following critical actions: research and documentation; education and awareness-raising; organizing grassroots communities; networking, alliance-making and coalition-building; petitions and collecting signatures; filing legal cases; participation in electoral campaigns; and international advocacy and solidarity.

1. Background

Over the decades, the Catholic community, led by its bishops, has been one of the most influential, active, and vocal actors in environmental protection in the Philippines. In particular, it has played a critical role in communities’ resistance to mining and extractive projects. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) issued, as early as 1988, a landmark, prophetic document considered a foundational pastoral letter on ecology. Entitled “What is Happening to our Beautiful Land?,” the letter was groundbreaking as it marked the first major, comprehensive statement by the Philippine Church on the environment.

The letter sounded alarm bells on the erosion of land, pollution of rivers, and destruction of forests. Environmental degradation was considered a moral issue, as the Church called for stewardship of natural resources and opposed destructive exploitation. It emphasized the connection between care for the environment and faith, noting that the destruction of nature violates God’s creation. The letter’s significance in terms of environmental advocacy was its direct call to action against ecological destruction. It urged individuals to use their influence to develop awareness of environmental issues and to organize people to be involved in concrete actions. It particularly called for ecological conversion among the Christian community, suggesting the establishment of a “Care of the Earth” ministry from the “basic Christian communities, through the parish structure and diocesan offices right up to the national level” (CBCP, 1988). The letter also appealed to the government “not to pursue short-term economic gains at the expense of long-term ecological damage.” Highlighting the important role of non-governmental organizations in spreading ecological awareness, it urged civil society to act as a watchdog to ensure that the government makes environmental issues a top priority. The impact of this letter has lasted for decades, as it has become the basis for subsequent pastoral statements on mining, climate change, and other environmental issues.

Ten years later, the bishops issued “A Statement of Concern on the Mining Act of 1995,” which mobilized the Catholic Church for the repeal of the mining law, Republic Act 7942 (CBCP, 1998). It strongly condemned the impact of large-scale mining on indigenous communities and ancestral lands. The statement asserted that environmental devastation and social displacement outweighed the economic gains from large-scale mining.



It also established the connection between environmental destruction and the violation of human life and dignity. It warned that “the implementation of the Mining Act will certainly destroy both environment and people and will lead to national unrest.” The document cited cases of environmental damage, specifically the mine tailing spills in Marinduque,¹ Negros Occidental,² and Benguet.³ It appealed to the people’s moral and social conscience and challenged the government to prioritize the poor and the earth over the interests of foreign-dominated mining companies.

In 2000, another pastoral statement was issued, “Water is Life,” which focused on water insecurity, watershed and aquifer protection, and the obligation to manage water as a sacred resource. It was released during a period when water services were being privatized, and water sources were being polluted. The bishops called for the protection of water sources as they stressed that water is essential for all life forms. The letter emphasized that logging operations, deforestation, non-implementation of environmental policies, and corruption by the elite caused the destruction of watersheds and aquifers, which threaten the country’s water security. It related the protection of water to the Church’s pro-life position, pointing out that “water means life and life is God’s greatest physical gift to us” (CBCP, 2000).

Another mining-specific statement from the bishops’ conference was issued in 2006. “Mining Issues and Concerns: Do Not Defile the Land Where You Live” reiterated the 1998 letter to repeal the Mining Act and to recall all approved mining concessions. It reflects the Church’s concern about the rapid expansion of mining operations and their negative consequences on local communities and the environment. The bishops argued that mining is tantamount to destroying life and creation, and that it violates the biblical mandate to protect the earth. The statement criticized the government for “allowing the interests of big mining corporations to prevail over people’s right to these sources,” which, the bishops argued, “amounts to violating their right to life” as “mining threatens people’s health and environmental safety through the wanton dumping of waste and tailings in rivers and seas” (CBCP, 2006). The bishops called for a stop to the government’s twenty-four priority mining projects and the closure of large-scale mining projects in various parts of the country.

¹ In 1996, the worst mining disaster in the Philippine history occurred in the island province of Marinduque. The drainage tunnels of Marcopper Mining Corporation’s open pit ruptured and discharged millions of toxic mine waste into the Makuplapnit-Boac river system, inundating villages, killing marine life and destroying crops.

² From 1982 to 1996, Maricalum Mining Corporation had three dam failures in Sipalay, Negros Occidental in the Visayas region of the Philippines. More than a thousand farmers and fisherfolk were displaced.

³ In August-September 2012, a series of mine tailing spills occurred in Itogon, Benguet in the northern part of the Philippines. The tailings pond of Philex Mining Corporation released millions of tons of waste into rivers, marking one of the country’s worst environmental disasters.

In 2019, the bishops released “An Urgent Call for Ecological Conversion: Hope in the Face of Climate Emergency.” This is a major pastoral letter where the Church declared a “climate emergency” while calling for a paradigm shift to re-establish the sacred relationship with nature (CBCP, 2019). They also instructed Catholic institutions to withdraw financial resources from mining companies, coal-fired power plants, and other extractive projects. They encouraged the transition to clean energy sources and supported the installation of solar power in churches and schools.

Regarding government policies, the CBCP advocated for the passage of proposed laws, such as the Rights of Nature Bill (RON) and the Alternative Minerals Management Bill (AMMB). The RON seeks to recognize ecosystems as legal entities with inherent rights to exist and thrive. This perspective shifts the view of nature from being merely property to being a subject with rights. It also allows lawsuits to be filed on behalf of nature to prevent ecological destruction. The AMMB, meanwhile, aims to direct mining activities for national development. It seeks to repeal and replace the Mining Act, moving government policy from export-oriented extraction to sustainable, nation-building mineral management. The AMMB prioritizes environmental protection, local community rights, and domestic processing, while proposing a ban on mining in designated ecological “no-go” zones.

In 2022, the bishops issued another pastoral statement on climate, “A Call for Unity and Action Amid a Climate Emergency and Planetary Crisis,” which outlined the Church’s commitment to urgent environmental action and ecological conversion. It formalized the “non-acceptance policy” of the Church for donations from mining and other extractive industries. The bishops also pledged to withdraw financial resources from banks and institutions that fund destructive industries like coal, fossil gas, mining, and logging. In terms of institutional support, CBCP (2022) called for the establishment of an Ecology Desk in every diocese to prioritize environmental projects and budgets. To foster ecological spirituality, the bishops institutionalized the celebration of *Laudato Si’* Week and the Season of Creation.⁴ They also supported the creation of a “*Laudato Si’* schools” framework together with the Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines (CEAP). Lastly, the statement formally supported the RON Bill in the Philippine Congress and promoted the *Sapat* Lifestyle campaign, urging a simpler and more sustainable way of living in order to reduce ecological footprints.⁵ The bishops described the current state of the world as a “planetary emergency,” and called on the government to declare a national state of emergency to align its policies with the biosphere’s instability.

These pastoral letters and statements provide a framework and direction to the Catholic community in the Philippines regarding advocacy for environmental preservation and campaigns against destructive industries. Historically, the Philippine Church has advanced its environmental advocacy by working through its parishes, educational institutions, and building partnerships with civil society networks. Local parishes and Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) play a key role in turning national pastoral letters into concrete initiatives, including campaigns opposing mining, logging, and plastic pollution. BECs are small, neighborhood-based groups of Christians who gather regularly to pray, reflect on Scripture, and integrate their faith into daily living. Usually comprising 15 to 20 families, BECs originated in the Philippines in the 1970s, particularly in the southern region of Mindanao. These communities foster close relationships, inspire social involvement, and encourage lay leadership, representing the “Church at the grassroots.” BECs nurture collaboration and a “Church for the poor,” acting as agents of evangelization and instruments of social transformation. Meanwhile, Catholic schools

⁴ The *Laudato Si’* Week is a series of events which takes place in May every year to celebrate the anniversary of the publication of *Laudato Si’* and mobilize action, see <https://laudatosiweek.org>. The Season of Creation takes place from September 1 to October 4 every year and is an ecumenical series of celebrations that centers on care for Creation, see <https://seasonofcreation.org>.

⁵ *Sapat* means “enough” or “sufficient”, see Rights of Nature Philippines (2023).

are instrumental in environmental advocacy by uniting ecological stewardship with Catholic Social Teaching (CST). They present environmental protection as both a moral and spiritual responsibility, and not merely a scientific concern. By weaving curriculum with practical initiatives, they cultivate “integral ecology,” encourage sustainable living, and promote a culture of caring for creation, inspired by Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’*.

As witnessed by the numerous and strongly worded bishops’ statements, mining is a critical issue in the Philippines. Despite the negative impacts of large-scale mining on the environment and communities, various administrations have aggressively promoted the mining industry, as the country boasts rich mineral resources. For instance, the Philippines has the fifth-largest nickel and fourth-largest cobalt and copper reserves in the world. The Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) has identified 9 million hectares as having high mineral potential, out of the Philippines’ total land area of 30 million hectares. As of April 1, 2026, there are six Financial or Technical Assistance Agreements (FTAAs)⁶ covering a total land area of 102,255.3134 hectares; 287 Mineral Sharing Production Agreements (MPSAs)⁷ covering 560,421.5648 hectares; and 59 Exploration Permits (EPs)⁸ covering 114,277.8994 hectares. There are currently 61 operating metallic mines (39 nickel mines, 11 gold mines, 3 copper mines, 4 chromite mines, and 4 iron mines) and 65 operating non-metallic mines (MGB 2026). The country’s top mineral exports are gold, nickel ore and products, and copper. Its major trading partners include China, Japan, Switzerland, Hong Kong, and India.

Although there are numerous mining projects in the Philippines, the industry’s contribution to the national economy remains minimal. According to the Philippine Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (PH-EITI), the mining and quarrying (MAQ) subsector accounts for only a small share of domestic economic activity, especially when compared to services and other industries. Over the years, MAQ’s share of GDP has fluctuated between just 0.4 percent and 0.8 percent (PH-EITI, 2025). Additionally, claims that the mining industry generates significant employment in the Philippines are unfounded. According to a study by the International Labor Organization (ILO), employment in the metal ores mining sector accounts for only about 0.2 percent of total employment nationwide, with 70 percent of workers involved in elementary occupations (ILO, 2025). Meanwhile, the extent of mining in the Mindanao region is massive in the context of the overall mining activities in the country. Of the six FTAAs, one is in the region, namely the Tampakan gold and copper project. Mindanao also has 88 MPSAs covering 250,884.9633 hectares and 12 EPs involving 21,335.6086 hectares. The above discussion situates the mobilizations and actions of the Catholic Church in one of the biggest mining sites in the country.

2. The Case

The Tampakan mining project is the largest undeveloped copper-gold site in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. It is set to cover 23,572 hectares and straddles four provinces in Mindanao (South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani, and Davao del Sur). If going ahead, the project is expected to extract an estimated 12.8 million metric tons of copper and 15.2 million ounces of gold from the site. The gold and copper deposits in the region are so large that estimates indicate it will take 70 years to excavate the minerals in Tampakan (Chavez, 2020).

⁶ FTAAs are contracts between the government and corporations (domestic or foreign-owned) for large-scale exploration, development, and utilization of mineral resources. They provide essential technology, management, and financing for projects requiring a minimum capital investment of \$50 million.

⁷ MPSAs are mining contracts, where the government grants a contractor exclusive rights to explore, develop, and utilize mineral resources in a specific area. The government retains ownership of the minerals, while the contractor provides all financing, technology, and personnel, sharing the resulting production in kind or value.

⁸ EPs give qualified entities the right to explore specific areas for mineral deposits, covering activities like geological surveys, drilling, and sampling.



At the time of writing (April 2026), the mining company, Sagittarius Mines, Inc. (SMI), has not yet begun commercial mining operations in Tampakan. However, the company has conducted extensive exploration, drilling, and pre-construction activities since 2003. Overall, the project has faced years of delays due to opposition, legal challenges, and the ban on open-pit mining.

In 1994, mineral reserves were first confirmed to be present in the area. The following year, the Australian firm Western Mining Corporation (WMC) was granted an FTAA to extract

copper and gold for a period of 25 years. The corporation later sold its mining rights to SMI. The mining contract, the country's second FTAA, was originally set to expire in 2020. However, environmental advocates discovered that SMI had received a 12-year extension in 2016, allowing the company to retain mining rights until 2032. This extension was quietly approved by the government, evading the close watch of civil society (see sections 3.5 and 3.6). The extension was justified by “acts or circumstances beyond the reasonable control of the contractor” (Chavez, 2020).

Due to its immense scale, the project has been facing significant opposition since it was first announced. Serious concerns have been raised regarding its impact, particularly on the Blaan Indigenous group, whose ancestral lands are encompassed by the mining area. Approximately 4,000 Indigenous people are expected to be displaced once the extraction of minerals commences. The project is also anticipated to harm the biodiversity and territorial integrity of the Blaan ancestral domain, endangering the tribe's culture and way of life as their lives depend on the forests, which they consider sacred.

Civil society groups have raised an alarm that the project will pollute water sources and affect irrigation systems, given that it is near the watersheds of various rivers. The Tampakan mine's tailings facility will also be built near a tributary of the Mal River, one of the largest river systems on Mindanao Island. A report from the Climate Change Congress of the Philippines reveals that the facility may lead to siltation and pollution in downstream farmlands, impacting approximately 10,000 farmers (Chavez, 2020). Residents are also concerned that mine tailings will flow into the 8,000-hectares key biodiversity wetland of Lake Buluan and Liguasan Marsh. In addition, the project's open-pit mining method is expected to clear around 3,935 hectares of natural-growth forests and arable lands, and will involve removing vegetation, soil, and bedrock, resulting in habitat destruction, biodiversity loss, and significant landscape alteration. It could also lead to soil erosion, water contamination, and air pollution.

SMI intends to extract minerals through an open-pit mining method. But given its highly destructive nature, environmental advocates have strongly opposed this method. The South Cotabato provincial government banned open-pit mining under its Environment Code. This ban was legally challenged by SMI, which questioned the validity of the code. Initially, the Regional Trial Court upheld the validity of the ban in 2020. Two years later, the Court of Appeals continued to declare that the ban on open-pit mining in the province was valid, but qualified that the prohibition applied only to small-scale miners. The court further clarified that the ban does not apply to large-scale mining operations, particularly the Tampakan project (Sarmiento 2022b).

Violence has surrounded the Tampakan mining project since it was announced. When the project was officially launched in January 2003, various units of the Philippine military were deployed to act as counterinsurgency forces. The mine area is also secured by an armed paramilitary detachment, which was partly set up to protect

private investments and the security contractors hired by SMI. In July 2002, Gurilmin Malid, a Blaan leader, and his young companion were reportedly ambushed and shot dead within the mine site. The military claimed the victims were bandits slain during legitimate military operations, while Catholic leaders described Malid as a “brave tribal leader” defending his land against mining (Sarmiento, 2022a).⁹ Since then, at least two dozen people have been killed within the mining tenement, including mining company security personnel and Indigenous children. According to news reports, firearms proliferate in the mine’s surrounding area. While the Blaan traditionally carry bladed weapons, they began to arm themselves with high-powered firearms in the mid-2000s. They feared that the mining company would destroy their sacred forests and force them to leave. Also present in the area were members of the New People’s Army (NPA), the armed group of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which is against large-scale mining as a government policy due to the destruction it brings. On New Year’s Day in 2008, SMI’s base camp was burned by about 40 NPA fighters. In a statement, the CPP said the raid “had the singular objective of punishing the giant Swiss mining firm for land grabbing, plunder and environmental destruction in response to a longstanding demand of the people to put a stop to the firm’s operations in the area” (CPP, 2008).

Despite large opposition, the project also has some backing from some tribal communities, given the company’s social projects in the area. Since it took over from WMC, SMI has been providing 3 million pesos (approximately \$59,000 USD) each year to five tribal councils, supporting scholarships, healthcare, livelihood, and development programs within their communities.

In 2020, SMI obtained the Certification Precondition (CP), a critical requirement from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) for all mining projects in the Philippines, which allows mineral deposits exploration and extraction within the ancestral domain. In the Tampakan case, the CP certified that Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs) have granted their consent to the mining project and confirmed that the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) process had been complied with by SMI.

The struggle against the Tampakan mining project has spanned three decades and continues to this day. All throughout this period, the Catholic Church has been actively involved in the resistance to the project. Its interventions ranged from research and documentation, awareness-raising, and popular education to legal challenges, petition-signing, networking, lobbying, and street demonstrations, as the next section details.

3. The Catholic Church’s Response to Mining in Tampakan

Research and Documentation

In the initial years following the approval of SMI’s contract, the Catholic Church, through the Social Action Center (SAC) of the Diocese of Marbel, organized Fact-Finding Missions (FFMs) to investigate reported human rights violations linked to the Tampakan mining project. In 2011, it initiated an FFM with the participation of the 27th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army, the Commission on Human Rights (CHR-RXII), the NCIP-RXII, radio station DXCP,¹⁰ and Santo Niño Parish, Tampakan, South Cotabato. Entitled “The Phenomenology of Mining: Human Rights-Based Fact-Finding Mission at Tampakan, South Cotabato” (SAC, 2011), the FFM investigated an ambush that resulted in the deaths of three drivers from a construction company owned by the then-Mayor of Tampakan. In response to the ambush, community members experienced harassment, food

⁹ All information in this paragraph and the next comes from Sarmiento (2022a).

¹⁰ DXCP is a radio station based in General Santos City, South Cotabato. Owned by the South Cotabato Communications Corporation, the media arm of the Diocese of Marbel.

and road blockades, threats, unlawful entry, and theft. The FFM found that the Mayor and his allies enforced food blockades that starved residents, caused the displacement of innocent civilians, and issued grave threats to those unconnected to the ambush. The FFM revealed blatant human rights violations committed by both the ambush perpetrators and the Mayor of Tampakan, along with his allies in the barangay¹¹ and his militias. The mission further showed that the ambush and the subsequent unlawful acts against civilians should not be viewed as isolated cases of crime or banditry. Rather, they stem from a resource-based conflict between pro-mining and anti-mining groups. The mission highlighted that mining companies often systematically employ human rights violations, political pressure, threats, the deployment of paramilitary groups at mining sites, and the displacement of communities as tactics to weaken opposition and compel acceptance of mining operations. These practices are not limited to the Tampakan mining project but are prevalent across all mining sites in Mindanao. The FFM also stated that using lands without FPIC or providing adequate compensation to landowners amounts to major human rights violations and violates existing laws and national policies. At the same time, it found that the hiring, subcontracting, or contracting of employees of SMI who worked overtime and had their labor services unpaid constitutes a violation of the Labor Code of the Philippines. Lastly, it revealed that most Indigenous peoples lacked knowledge of the impact of mining on their economic base, agricultural livelihoods, and social and cultural well-being.

The following year, in January 2012, Tampakan Forum, a civil society network, received reports from the SAC of Marbel regarding human rights abuses against the Blaan Indigenous group. Another FFM was undertaken by the CBCP and its National Secretariat for Social Action—Justice and Peace (NASSA-Justice and Peace), in partnership with other organizations.¹² During the investigation, the FFM team determined that, despite the FTAA granted in 1995, SMI's proposed mining operation lacked the consent and support of the majority of Blaan communities and other residents in the project area (SAC and Tampakan Forum, 2012). Additionally, it found that in the first quarter of 2012, SMI undertook activities such as road construction, community meetings, and relocation announcements, even though its application for an Environmental Compliance Certificate (ECC) had been rejected. These actions defied an order from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) prohibiting the company from engaging in any development activities while the ECC application was under appeal. SMI's insistence on pursuing its initiatives at the project site further destabilized security in the affected communities and escalated the conflict between anti-mining residents and the company and its local allies.

The study highlighted the power imbalances between the protesting villagers and the company, which, with its vast resources, seemed to have secured the support of the military, police, local officials, and other government authorities. Furthermore, the project was strongly backed by the national government through its FTAA and the mining policy outlined in the 1995 Mining Act. The FFM team documented cases of harassment, a summary killing, property destruction, movement restrictions, and disregard of cultural and religious beliefs against the Blaan and other residents who led or joined protest actions. The team itself had a first-hand experience of the social divisiveness caused by SMI's project when it was twice prevented by the barricades set up by the pro-mining Blaan people from reaching one of the primary mining impact areas. Among its recommendations, the FFM urged a high-profile investigation of the situation in Tampakan to be led by CHR,¹³ a withdrawal of the military presence, a restraint on SMI activities, a dialogue process between pro- and anti-mining members of

¹¹ A barangay is the smallest administrative division and basic local government unit in the Philippines, acting as a village, ward, district, or neighborhood.

¹² These were: Philippine Misereor Partnership, Philippine Human Rights Center, Legal Rights Center (LRC)-Kasama sa Kalikasan, Alyansa Tigil Mina (ATM), Philippine Association for Intercultural Development (PAFID), Koalisyon ng Katutubong Samahan ng Pilipinas (KASAPI), Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP), Sentro ng Alternatibong Lingap Panligal (SALIGAN), and the Commission on Human Rights (CHR).

¹³ The CHR or Commission on Human Rights is an independent government body, created by the 1987 Philippine Constitution.

the Blaans, and an FPIC process in the Blaans ancestral domains affected by the SMI project. However, the CHR, which was part of the FFM, failed to issue a resolution on the issue. Also, the military did not withdraw its troops, compelling the Blaans to install their customary defense system and strongly oppose military presence. The mining company, on the other hand, ordered an immediate stop to its activities in the area. There was no dialogue between pro and anti-mining members of Blaans, but both parties attended a Congressional inquiry on the issue. Lastly, the FPIC process was later initiated, enabling the company to secure the required CP. After 2012, there were no major documentations or FFMs, as the campaign focused on ensuring the ban on open-pit mining stayed in place.

Education and Awareness-Raising Activities

While undertaking research and documentation, the SAC of Marbel also organized educational forums and awareness sessions for communities, especially among Indigenous peoples, on the Philippine Mining Act and the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA). The Church's initial step was to ensure that these communities understood both the impacts of mining and their rights. Church workers first conducted research to confirm that the ancestral domain of the Indigenous peoples would be affected by the proposed mining site. Thereafter, they visited barangays and established communication with local communities. Often, certain individuals were designated as contact persons within these communities. They were specially trained and led broader educational efforts within their communities. Church workers explained the mining company's plans and consulted the Indigenous groups about their response, asking whether the community would be willing to relinquish their land for mining operations. They informed about the fundamental requirement of obtaining FPIC and emphasized that no projects or initiatives are going to be implemented in ancestral domains without the consent of their communities.

In addition to engaging with Indigenous groups, the Diocese of Marbel also organized educational sessions for local communities within the mining company's territorial claim. They launched a large-scale campaign focused on environmental protection and advocacy. Mobilizing BECs, it disseminated information about the environmental and social risks of the \$5.9-billion mining project, particularly on the Blaans Indigenous community, and explained its possible impacts. It also ran sessions on socio-economic and political education for members of the BECs, such as information about governance structures and the role of local government, alongside formation sessions on Catholic social teaching.

Among other education and awareness-raising activities, the SAC of Marbel led public discussions, media briefings, and forums aimed at informing stakeholders about the long-term impacts of the project. In 2021, they also launched a diocese-wide campaign titled "Protect Nature, Protect Our Future," using translated materials in local languages to explain the dangers of the proposed open-pit mining method.

Organizing Grassroots Communities

While the SAC conducted educational activities, it also sought to organize communities. It established people's organizations (POs) of Indigenous peoples, farmers, athletes, young Catholics, and anti-mining groups, among others. These organizations formed the backbone of the resistance against mining. They joined protest actions, signature drives, forums, educational discussions, and many other anti-mining activities.

At the same time, the Church organized inter-religious dialogue with other faith-based organizations among the three major religious groups in South Cotabato (Christians, Muslims, and Indigenous peoples who have maintained their ancestral beliefs). Whatever local communities' belief systems, they confront the same social issues and economic concerns, and they would be equally affected by the impact of mining operations and the destruction to the environment.

Networking, Alliances and Coalition-Building

A major component of the campaign against large-scale mining involved linking up with various groups and civil society formations and building coalitions and alliances united by a common purpose and strategy. The Diocese of Marbel initiated and led these coalitions. It served as the lead convenor of the Coalition of Social Development Organizations (CSDO), which was composed of 21 civil society organizations in South Cotabato. Various networks were established and developed, such as the Coalition Against Mining Movement (CAMP).



The establishment of the Tampakan Forum, which is an alliance of civil society and community sectors, is another crucial initiative against large-scale mining in Tampakan. It is the primary organizer and driving force behind the opposition to the copper-gold mining project in South Cotabato. The Forum plays a pivotal role in lobbying for environmental protection, organizing opposition to SMI, and coordinating legal actions to uphold the ban on open-pit mining (see section 3.6). The Diocese of Marbel and its SAC played a key leadership role in the Tampakan Forum. The Forum facilitated discussions and united various sectors, including faith-based groups, civil society organizations, people's organizations, and Indigenous groups. However, it became inactive for nearly a decade and was revitalized in 2020 after the mining company's FTAA was extended and ECC renewed. The revival of the Forum was supported by major groups such as the CBCP-NASSA–Justice and Peace, Philippine Misereor Partnership Inc. (PMPI),¹⁴ and Alyansa Tigil Mina (ATM).

Today, the Forum serves as a technical working group, drawing on scientific data, human rights perspectives, and legal analysis to question the project's legitimacy and emphasize its environmental risks, including possible harm to agriculture and watersheds. The Forum actively supports the 2010 South Cotabato Provincial Environment Code, which prohibits open-pit mining, and is committed to preventing its repeal or override by national government actions that favor SMI. The Tampakan Forum plays a vital role in elevating local struggles to national and international attention by organizing seminars, webinars, and highlighting the impacts on local communities and ancestral domains. It provides backing for local officials who oppose the mine, aligning with efforts to revoke business permits for SMI based on environmental and legal grounds.

Petitions and Signature Drives

A major part of the anti-mining campaign was the various signature drives. They were intended to show the broad opposition to the mining project and were used as a basis to appeal to government authorities to stop

¹⁴ The Philippine Misereor Partnership Inc. (PMPI) is a social development and advocacy network in the Philippines, established in 2003. It is a partnership of civil society organizations, church-based groups, and Misereor (the German Catholic agency part of Caritas Internationalis).

the implementation of the project. In August 2021, the Diocese of Marbel launched a signature campaign to demand the retention of the open-pit mining ban. The bishop urged parishioners, especially the youth, to help the signature campaign go viral on social media.¹⁵ He emphasized that even areas lacking internet access would be reached through BECs (Sarmiento, 2021a). This signature campaign was conducted in parallel to a massive education awareness program (see section 3.2), and received widespread support at the national level, such as from the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, ATM, Legal Rights Centre (LRC), and PMPI, among others. Caritas Philippines also called on Filipinos to support the campaign, arguing that the project “will never be in favor of the general welfare of the province.” The humanitarian, development, and advocacy arm of the CBCP added, “We are not convinced that it will bring genuine economic freedom to our impoverished communities, nor justice to the deteriorating Mindanao ecosystem” (Sarmiento, 2021).

As a result of the campaign, 93,453 signatures were submitted to the provincial board in December 2021. However, on May 16, 2022, the provincial board of South Cotabato approved the proposal to lift the controversial ban on open-pit mining. With no objections from the provincial board members present, the plenary approved the amendment to the Environment Code on its second reading, specifically lifting the ban on open-pit mining.

The decision caused immediate backlash, with the Diocese of Marbel leading protests against the measure, citing environmental risks to the region. According to the SAC of Marbel, more than 10,000 people joined the demonstration, which started with a march in Koronadal City (capital city of the South Cotabato Province, and also known as Marbel) from Christ the King Cathedral to the provincial government offices to demand that the provincial board “stands firm in its duty to ensure the safety, convenience, and well-being of its constituents,” and to uphold the provincial Environment Code and its open-pit mining ban. “This is the right thing to do and to ensure that the future generations inherit a better society, enjoying the fruits of a sound environment,” the diocese said in a statement (Sarmiento, 2021). Bishop Cerilo Casicas particularly urged the governor of the province of South Cotabato to veto the local legislature’s controversial decision. “The people have spoken, and this is the ultimate truth that you should consider as governor. To do otherwise, I may even say, you will be remiss in your duty,” the bishop said (Sarmiento, 2021).

Two weeks later, on June 4, 2022, the governor vetoed the ordinance approved by the provincial board. This meant the ban stayed in place, preventing the immediate start of open-pit operations. In his formal veto message, the governor said the amended ordinance is “prejudicial to the public welfare and inimical to the overall interest” of South Cotabato residents (Estabillo, 2022). He stated that he “could not find any compelling reason why the Sangguniang Panlalawigan [provincial board] would amend a decade-old ordinance that ably and effectively [protected] the people of South Cotabato from the ill effects of the wanton destruction of our God-given resources by the multinational corporations which will only leave the province after the extraction of our natural wealth” (Estabillo, 2022).

In October 2023, a petition was submitted to the Office of the President, and subsequently forwarded to the DENR, by a group of Roman Catholic bishops from south-central Cotabato.¹⁶ The letter asked to declare the 12-year extension of SMI’s FTAA illegal. The bishops asserted the FTAA’s extension was “unconstitutionally” approved by the DENR’s attached agency, the MGB. According to the bishops, the approval was beyond the

¹⁵ The current bishop of the Diocese of Marbel is Most Rev. Cerilo “Allan” Uy Casicas, D.D. (2018–present). He succeeded, Most Rev. Dinualdo Destajo Gutierrez, who served as bishop from 1981 to 2018.

¹⁶ It was signed by the Bishop of the Diocese of Marbel (Cerilo Casicas), the Archbishop of Cotabato (Angelito Lampon), the Bishop of the Diocese of Kidapawan (Jose Colin Bagaforo), and the Bishop of the Diocese of Digos (Guillermo Afable), who represented the communities affected by the mining operations.

agency's jurisdiction, therefore making the decision and document void. They further stated the 12-year extension for the Tampakan project (until March 21, 2032) was approved in 2016 without proper authorization and only became public in 2020 after the expiry date of the initial contract (Cabato, 2023). Legal advisers to the bishops argued that SMI should have conducted consultations, environmental impact assessments, and other regulatory compliances for renewal since the Tampakan FTAA had already lapsed. They further stated that SMI's claim of *force majeure* as the basis for the FTAA extension was unfounded (Cabato, 2023).

Filing Legal Cases

On October 4, 2024, the Bishop of Marbel led the filing of a Petition for Certiorari against the 12-year extension of the FTAA for the Tampakan project.¹⁷ In a statement, the bishop explains the filing of the legal case on social and environmental grounds: “The Tampakan mine threatens to devastate the local ecosystem, poses health risks to our people, and could lead to the potential displacement and loss of farming and fishing livelihoods across three provinces here in Mindanao. [...] The Tampakan Mining FTAA should not have been extended without full presidential oversight and prior consultation and consent from our affected communities” (Oeconomedia, 2024).

The filing of the case was done in partnership with the LRC, which argued that “The Constitution mandates that only the President can enter into agreements involving Financial or Technical Assistance; no other person in government has been ordained with this power to contract, not even an MGB director,” and that “that entering into such agreements requires the President to ensure that the rights to a balanced and healthful environment are protected, as well as the people's right to participate in social, political, and economic decision-making” (Oeconomedia, 2024).

The Regional Trial Court of Koronadal held its first hearing on the certiorari case on September 3, 2025, approximately 11 months after the petition was filed. The case is still ongoing.

Participating in Electoral Campaigns

As part of its environmental advocacy and contribution to education and awareness-raising, the Catholic Church brought mining issues to the agenda of national election debates. During the 2013 election campaign, the Diocese of Marbel launched the “Team Pabor-Team Ayaw” (Team For – Team Against) campaign. The initiative involved educating local voters on the position or stand of candidates regarding the Tampakan mining project of SMI and the coal-fired power plant of the Sarangani Energy Corporation (SEC). It was hoped that the candidates' position on the mining issue would determine the outcome of the elections.



¹⁷ Petition for Certiorari is a special civil action filed to correct errors of jurisdiction or “grave abuse of discretion” by a court, tribunal, or officer. Other petitioners included the Columbio Multi-Sectoral Ecology Movement, La Bugal Blaan Tribal Association, and a variety of Irrigators Associations in the region.

In 2021, the diocese likewise announced that it would engage in the 2022 mid-term elections. Bishop Casicas said, “Definitely, the Diocese of Marbel will make mining and the environment an important issue during the coming elections. It will be part of the discernment in choosing the candidates” (Sarmiento 2021).

At the national level, the CBCP was also involved in an electoral campaign during the 2022 and 2025 national election dubbed the “Green Agenda” (Caritas PH, 2025). This initiative involves the evaluation and endorsement of “green candidates” who agree to push for a set of environmental policies and reform measures once elected. Along with environmental groups and civil society networks, faith-based organizations drafted the content of the “Green Agenda” and popularized it through forums, press conferences, and social media posts. In the 2025 mid-term elections, only a handful of national candidates, including party-list groups, were endorsed by environmental groups since only a few politicians committed to the Green Agenda. None of the endorsed senatoriables won a seat, but three allied party-list groups were able to secure seats in the House of Representatives. In Tampakan, South Cotabato, anti-mining candidates won in the municipal executive and legislative positions.

International Advocacy and Solidarity

The successful campaign in Tampakan contributed to the international advocacy for Indigenous rights as well as against the exploitative nature of extractive projects. For one, the Catholic Church’s staunch ally, ATM,¹⁸ has shared the experiences of the struggle in Tampakan at international forums and conferences, providing substantial bases and fortifying calls against the destruction caused by extractive projects. In 2014 and 2017, ATM brought the case of the Tampakan campaign to the United Nations (UN) in Geneva during the negotiations of a proposed treaty to hold transnational corporations accountable to human rights obligations. In 2016, the Tampakan case was shared with Philippine delegates to the UN Business and Human Rights (UNBHR) also held in Geneva, supported by Franciscans International, Misereor, and Fastenopfer (cath.ch, 2016; Franciscans International, 2016). In 2014, Global Witness reported that the Tampakan mine was a driving force to violence and killings in Mindanao, and presented the killings of the Capion family in 2012 as evidence (Global Witness, 2014).

As a member of the Thematic Social Forum on Mining and Extractivism and the Asia-Pacific Gathering on Human Rights and Extractives, ATM banded with organizations from various countries to advocate for the rights of mining-affected communities, highlighting impacts on biodiversity, the environment, and human rights.

The Tampakan project was also among the cases cited in a paper on energy transition minerals, entitled “Energy Transition Minerals: Digging Out the Critical Issues” (ATM, 2024), which discussed the potential impacts of the Tampakan mine on the environment and communities. The paper also argued that the Global North must reduce its consumption of materials and minerals, considering the environmental destruction and human rights violations suffered by mining-affected communities. It asserted that there should be no “sacrifice zones,” where deforestation and displacement of communities are justified for the sake of extracting minerals, a large bulk of which, the paper argued, will be used for electric vehicles. The importance of the participation of local communities and Indigenous groups in decisions concerning mining and other investment projects was likewise emphasized.

The Tampakan struggle was also among the cases highlighted in dialogues with the staff of the members of

¹⁸ ATM or Alyansa Tigil Mina is a coalition of organizations and groups challenging the aggressive promotion of large-scale mining in the Philippines. It is both an advocacy group and a people’s movement, working in solidarity to protect Filipino communities and natural resources threatened by large-scale mining operations.

Parliament in Germany in 2024. It was featured in a presentation and discussion before various government agencies and civil society groups in a conference in Berlin during a week-long event tackling raw materials and energy transition minerals.

4. Concluding Reflections

Together with civil society organizations, grassroots communities, and Indigenous groups, the Catholic Church contributed significantly to the resistance against the Tampakan mining project, which has delayed its implementation. For decades, the Diocese of Marbel has been the primary and unwavering organizing force opposing the Tampakan copper and gold mining project. Motivated by stewardship, environmental justice, and a preferential option for the poor, the Church has used its moral authority, initiated legal challenges, and galvanized grassroots movements to resist the large-scale open-pit mine project of SMI. The campaign against large-scale mining in Tampakan encompassed a wide range of strategies and actions from the project's inception to the present. This is perhaps the primary reason the mining company has been unable to start commercial operations more than three decades after the project's mining contract was approved in 1995.

This case study has documented that the Catholic Church not only conducted research and educational activities, but it also acted as a petitioner in various legal cases. It likewise helped mobilize communities through signature drives, mass mobilizations, and electoral campaigns. Furthermore, the anti-mining movement adopted an effective strategy using legal means such as the legislation of the South Cotabato Environment Code, which specifically bans open-pit mining. There was an attempt by the provincial board to lift the ban on open-pit mining through an ordinance, but the legislation was overturned by the provincial governor, helped by political pressure from the Church and the anti-mining movement. At the same time, SMI challenged the code in the courts. It took several years before the mining company was able to secure a favorable ruling. However, the court decision is not yet final as the provincial governor and advocates plan to question it before the Supreme Court, the highest court in the country. These legal mobilizations against the revocation of the code became a major stumbling block in the implementation of the mining project.

In addition, through protest and creative actions, massive education and signature campaigns, the anti-mining movement was able to successfully pressure and influence politicians and decision-makers to uphold the ban on open-pit mining, as illustrated by the veto of the provincial governor of the legislative ordinance to lift the ban. This is why it is crucial that the Church and the movement against destructive large-scale mining persist in engaging in electoral campaigns and voter education. Local government officials, in particular, play a critical role in decisions concerning mining projects. Ensuring that these officials have strong environmental advocacies and are allied with groups and residents opposing large-scale mining could mean the difference between preventing or allowing large-scale, destructive mining operations.

In terms of underlying narratives and arguments, the CBCP pastoral letters were able to provide guidance and a lens, which helped people view and comprehend the mining issue. By framing mining and extractivism as an ethical or moral concern, the Church was able to help counter the propaganda of mining corporations regarding the so-called benefits of mining. Its argument that the environment and natural resources are God's creations and are part of humankind's common home that must be preserved for future generations resonates beyond the Catholic community to other spiritual traditions, such as Muslim and Indigenous groups in the region. Emphasizing the value of long-term sustainability versus short-term gains, the Church was able to provide the broader and bigger picture concerning extractives.

It also furthered its moral integrity by instructing its institutions to divest from environmentally harmful projects and adopting the policy of rejecting donations from mining companies and other corporations engaged in destructive and exploitative activities. These policies and measures signaled to the faithful the Church's firm conviction and consistent approach for environmental protection, the sanctity of nature, and a life of dignity for people, especially marginalized Indigenous groups.

The Church's massive education on the scope and potential impacts of the mining project, as well as the rights of the Indigenous peoples under the Mining Act and the IPRA Law, helped the communities understand the implications of the project. This enabled the Blaan communities to oppose SMI's project for several years and forestall the start of its mining operations. However, after many years of dangling jobs, scholarships, road projects, and other services for the communities, the mining company succeeded in causing division among marginalized groups, especially the Indigenous peoples. Some anti-mining residents changed their minds and eventually accepted the mining project. They leased their lands and gave their consent, leading to the company's compliance with FPIC requirements. But because of the shortcomings of SMI in delivering their promises, many of those who have given their consent have also become wary of the mining project.

Overall, the commercial operations of SMI's copper and gold mining project may have been delayed for three decades, but preventing them from going ahead once and for all remains a big challenge. Despite the Church's efforts in the 2022 national elections to push for a "green" candidate, the election of President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr., as well as international economic pressure, is pushing for the expansion of mining operations in the Philippines. Anti-mining resistance must step up its efforts and exhaust all possible avenues to block the project's full implementation.

There is an urgent need to challenge the argument for the so-called "green transition" as a response to the climate crisis. Governments, international financial institutions, and mining corporations have latched onto the narrative that mining operations must be expanded to supply the transition or critical minerals necessary for the shift to renewable energy. What is not emphasized, however, is that a significant portion of the demand for minerals will go to electric vehicles, AI data centers, and military technology and weapons.

In this context, the moral voice of the Church is needed to counter the mainstream narrative for the "green transition" and expose the truth and realities behind the demand for more mining. This is precisely what the Church did when the Catholic Church's continental episcopal conferences from the Global South issued a historic statement at COP30 in Belem, Brazil (November 2025), titled "A Call for Climate Justice and the Common Home: Ecological Conversion, Transformation and Resistance to False Solutions." The Church amplified the criticism of many international movements that have called on the proposed measures to address the climate crisis as a "false solution" because they do not address systemic injustice and inequalities. Among other calls, the Church demanded "policies that transform production cycles and the culture of consumption, making them more equitable and sustainable, ensuring that economic and energy transitions do not perpetuate inequalities or compromise human rights or the environment" (CELAM, FABC, and SECAM, 2025, p.11). To further support the struggle against massive extractivism, the Church could reinforce calls against the various wars being waged and the utilization of minerals for military equipment.

Lastly, the Catholic Church in the Philippines, along with environmental groups and social movements, must persist in pushing for alternatives to the extractives industry, such as agro-forestry, eco-tourism, and watershed development. Consistent lobbying and advocacy efforts must be undertaken to repeal the Philippine Mining Act

of 1995 and replace it with the AMMB. There must also be a stronger push for equally important bills, such as the National Land Use Act, Sustainable Forestry Management Bill, Right to Information Law, RON Law, and a law that would protect environmental and human rights defenders. Their safety and security remain a crucial issue as Global Witness consistently ranked the Philippines as the deadliest country in Asia from 2012 to 2024 for those protecting the environment (Geronimo, 2025). Mining-related killings account for a third of the killings documented by the international watchdog.

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