

■ OPINION

## Miners' destruction of arable land puts food security at risk

Mpumalanga is particularly vulnerable in the tug-of-war between farmers and mining giants

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Picture: REUTERS/SIPHIWE SIBEKO

On September 30 I attended a high-level policy roundtable. The question at hand: could (and should) soya beans

Soya beans are critical for animal feed, and as incomes rise so does the demand for animal products. In fact, S nearly doubled between 2001 and 2018, and the country has not been able to meet its demand for poultry feed, bean oil cakes, 90% of which is imported from Argentina.

As agribusiness executives interacted, one asked, “Why can’t we expand soya bean production in Mpumalanga? the agribusinesses in the competition for land – and the two industries can’t share the same ground because damage imposed by mining.

This is not unique to Mpumalanga. In many parts of Africa and South America the competition for land use has It’s like a game of tug of war: farmers and agriculturalists on one end of the rope, and domestic and international Historically, government policies have often favoured the extractors – it was easy to “get rich quick” at the time to grow

In recent months farmers in Peru’s central Arequipa region have led a protest against the construction of Tia Maria Southern Copper.

The mining site is 2km from the Tambo Valley and is home to 24,000 people who rely on agriculture for their livelihood from fear of the long-term consequences of open-pit mining on agriculture, the environment and water, as copper and sulphur dioxide are leaked into the surroundings. Tia Maria Mine would threaten a minimum of 1,300ha of

The protests in Peru began peacefully: unions and farmers came together to set up roadblocks in the Tambora region, but the notion that their own livelihoods should suffer at the expense of an international mining company. Surprisingly, the protests on the streets peacefully, they were met by 400 plus federal police, who used excessive violence to quell the protest.

The tug of war game between agriculturalists and mining firms over land use has significant implications for food security. The precedence over farming such that land cannot be used to grow crops, a country risks creating food shortage and losing mining revenues.

In SA, mining, particularly for coal, has irrevocably damaged land and thus agriculture potential — the point raised at the roundtable. While Mpumalanga holds 40% of SA's moderate- and high-potential arable land, it is also partly affected by mining given the province's coal endowments.

A study by the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP) found that at the current rate coal mining, about 10% of potential arable land will be permanently damaged by coal mining, with a further 14% being subject to coal pollution.

The BFAP study shows that existing coal mining activities could lead to a loss of 284,844 tons of maize a year, because it is grown in areas that are being prospected. This has marked effects on food security, and the price of maize will increase by 14%. If coal mining continues to grow, thereby extending the loss of maize-growing land in the process, the loss, translating to 1.2Mt of maize, ultimately enough to make SA a permanent maize importer.

So, let's go back to our game of tug-of-war between our agriculturalists and mining companies. Whether a farmer or a miner, the struggle is largely the same. There is a limited amount of highly arable land. Mining firms have generally been successful in taking away from their livelihoods and by extension people of their food. Addressing this requires a clear and updated demand for land.

Moreover, as many financial institutions are reluctant to finance coal mining institutions because of growing concerns about climate change, there is a need for a reprioritisation of land use. In Mpumalanga, where agribusinesses see potential for expansion, coal, which has been dominant for decades, seems to be on the back foot as the scramble for renewable energy begins.

SA has been endowed with an abundance of minerals and arable land, which has given way to the challenge faced by farmers given that they cannot always coexist, there is a right and wrong answer. For long-term sustainability, agriculturalists need to be heard.

- *Baskaran is a development economics PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge.*