

August 2, 2016

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Dear Mr. Solheim,

We are a group of environmental and human rights organizations writing to you regarding the growing but dangerously overlooked issue of mine tailings dam safety. We congratulate you on your appointment as Executive Director of UNEP, and urge you to make the management of mine tailings dams safety a high priority for the agency under your leadership, in light of the multiple disasters caused by tailings dam collapses that have occurred in just the past few years.

Almost one year ago, in response to the Mount Polley disaster, we [wrote](#) to former director Achim Steiner about the need for UNEP to address tailings dam failures, and provide guidance regarding oversight and standards for these facilities. Since that time, there has been at least one high-profile failure, this time with fatalities.

In November 2015, two tailings dams burst at the Samarco mine in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, engulfing a village, with mine waste, ripping off roofs, and killing at least 19 people. Hundreds of people were evacuated from the area and many remain displaced. Samarco is co-owned by two of the world's largest mining companies, Brazilian Vale SA and Anglo-Australian BHP Billiton.

What's more, the cascading frequency of spills is likely just the beginning. A [technical study](#)¹ released last year after the August 2014 Mount Polley disaster in Canada last year concluded that catastrophic mine waste failures are increasing in frequency and severity and will continue to do so until regulators and mining companies take active steps to prevent them.

In a reply to our letter from last year, the office of Mr. Steiner noted that UNEP is conducting a review of "guidance and best practices that are currently available." While we are pleased to learn this, we urge UNEP to ensure that this review process is open, transparent and inclusive

¹ Center for Science in Public Participation, "Risk-Public Liability-Economics of Tailings Storage Facility Failures," July 2015, <http://www.csp2.org/technical-reports>

of civil society participants. And given the extent of preventable damage from these multiple tailing breaches, we believe the agency must do far more.

The [panel of independent experts](#)² commissioned by the British Columbia government after the Mount Polley disaster has provided clear guidance on best practices to avoid repeat tailings dam disasters. Indeed, disasters such as the Samarco spill could have been avoided had their recommendations been implemented. We call on UNEP to develop an oversight body to ensure that these best practices are implemented at mine sites around the world to ensure that the disasters at the Mount Polley and Samarco mines are never repeated. We urge UNEP to form this body in consultation with representatives from civil society and mining-impacted communities. We also request a meeting or call with UNEP to discuss next steps.

With thousands of mine tailings dams posing a risk to the environment and communities in over a hundred countries across the planet, tailings dam safety is truly a global problem that demands leadership from UNEP.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

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² Mount Polley independent expert panel investigation and review, Final Report, January 2015, <https://www.mountpolleyreviewpanel.ca/>