Costs and Benefits of Conflicts

In a little town in Vermont there was a town debate over an old copper mine. According to some community members, the old mine leaked materials that polluted the nearby rivers. One group, let’s call them “the Environmentalists,” wanted the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to come in and spend millions of dollars to fill in the mine and stop the pollution. Another group, let’s call them “the Historians,” believed that the pollution was negligible and that the site was historic. They wanted to make it into a historical site where tourists and school groups could learn about copper mining and its role in Vermont’s history.

COSTS:

Human: This was a peaceful conflict. No one was hurt or killed. However tension rose, friendships were strained and the town was divided between the supporters of the Environmentalists and the Historians.

Economic: • The EPA proposed a $16 million cleanup, even though there were heated arguments over the effect of the pollution. • Activists dedicated seven years of time and money to lobbying the EPA and convincing community members of their perspectives.

Organizational: • Scholars have devoted time, energy and money to the project. Several Dartmouth Professors assessed the environmentalists’ data and argued against an EPA cleanup. • Consultants were hired and paid to assess the problem and proposed alternative solutions.

BENEFITS:

Human: • Attention was given to the poorer members of the community to determine if their drinking water was clean and their living space pollution-free. • Although the two groups were not friendly to each other, the Historians and the Environmentalists got new members. Old members grew more committed to the groups. • Activists gained powerful, leadership positions in the community.

Economic: • More attention was given to the little town. Scientists, EPA officials and consultants all came to investigate the problem. When they came they bought things at the local store or ate lunch at the deli.

Organizational: • Other environmental issues surfaced. Community discussions began to address the erosion of the nearby river as well, a problem that had been largely ignored for many years.
• Consultants have profited.
• The local school built an interdisciplinary unit around the problem to educate themselves and community members.

**Summary:** The mine controversy is a conflict with great costs, but also some important benefits. While friendships have been torn asunder and the time, money, and energy of individuals sunk deep into the mire of conflict, some important positive results have emerged. Interest in both the town's environment and its history has grown and poor people, and their struggles, have been spotlighted.