

Mining and Indigenous Communities in Fiji and the Northern Territory of Australia.

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Abstract

Indigenous communities around the globe have experienced both positive and negative impacts from mining. The severity of the impacts has been shown to vary with the distance between the mine and the community. The shorter this distance the greater the effort is required to minimise the potential for conflict between the indigenous community and the company. Both parties need to be aware of each other's concerns and potential benefits from the mine. This requires community participation, regular communication, consultation, and respect for the needs and interests of both parties throughout each stage of the mine. Indigenous responsibility for the land and self-determination for economic development imply that social and environmental considerations are interrelated and need to be addressed as such.

This paper discusses the commonalities between Indigenous communities that exist in close proximity to mines both in Fiji and in the Northern Territory of Australia particularly with regards to issues of exploration, mining and post-mining. Specifically, the following issues will be discussed:

- *Land issues*
- *Environmental issues*
- *Social – economic issues and opportunities*
- *Social issues*
- *Communication and Consultation*
- *Community awareness of the exploration and mining procedures*
- *Attitudes / conflicts with regard to exploration and mining*
- *Health and Safety*

Implementing strategies to address these issues can facilitate community development.

1.0 Introduction

“Just as we have come to understand that there are clear and measurable indicators for whether an ore body can be developed and exploited in an economically and environmentally feasible manner, so it is possible to understand and evaluate the social aspects of mine development.” (Anderson 1996) This can be identified and achieved through social impact analysis and social-economic planning by the joint efforts of all stakeholders in a mining project. Consistent and continuous communication, consultation, and reporting by all parties involved are essential. All stakeholders must be equally informed to reduce the possibility of misinformation that may lead to conflict.

Positive and negative social impacts of mining occur at both the macro (national level) and at micro level (local community level). It starts when the first words about a proposed mining project are uttered publicly, even before any exploration work has commenced. These words may lead to high expectations or anxiety, particularly for the landowner or occupier if such news is received second hand via the media or other means. Confusion, inadequate information, and lack of knowledge and experience with regard to the mineral industry can exacerbate these expectations and anxieties.

It is the responsibility of all stakeholders including the company, contractors, government and non-government agencies, land owners and occupiers to work together to encourage the positive effects and minimise the negative impacts of such a project. This involves social and economic assessment, planning and management throughout all stages of the project from pre-exploration to post decommissioning. Through this process strategies that are sustainable can be developed and implemented to facilitate community development. Furthermore it is essential that social impact assessment be incorporated in the environmental impact assessment and the environmental management plan of the project. After all many of the social impacts are the result of the environmental impacts of mining. Also, many indigenous beliefs are closely affiliated to the land and the environment. “It is unwise to separate environmental and social impacts, since they are interrelated through indigenous culture and perceptions.”(Craig and Ehrlich et al 1996)

2.0 With regards to mining, what do Indigenous Communities in Fiji and the Northern Territory have in common?

First and foremost, Indigenous Fijians and Indigenous Territorians are the traditional owners of land who have strong affiliations with the land. The land is part of their being. It is their life source and soul. Their spiritual connection with the land is vital such that damage to sacred sites and sites of significance can be catastrophic. For many it is their source of sustenance and, for many Indigenous Fijians, it is their livelihood. Consequently, protection of sacred sites and retaining access to land is paramount for indigenous groups.

Indigenous Fijians own 83% of the land in Fiji (Fiji MRD), and in the Northern Territory about 50% is currently owned by Indigenous Territorians with a further 45% subject to native title claims (DBIRD). In both cases the land cannot be sold or surrendered and access requires the consent of the traditional landowners. Much of these indigenous lands are highly prospective, resulting in much exploration and mining work occurring inevitably close to indigenous communities. In fact, about 80% of the mines in the Northern Territory are on indigenous land (NLC).

A significant proportion of the mines in Fiji and the Northern Territory are in close proximity to indigenous communities and so are visible and easily heard. Residents can daily observe mining operations and rehabilitation work in progress.

A community close to a proposed mine site, compared to one further away, is likely to have higher expectations, and more frequent demands from the mine. These expectations may be higher still in regions where the alternatives for employment or income are low.

Also being close to the mine, community residents often expect immediate response from the company. Consequently, any concerns they may have about the mine and its activities may be reinforced or alternatively, put to rest. What's more, the company, the mine, its operations and human resources are more open to scrutiny and criticism. These situations represent opportunities for good relationships and community building activities. Therefore, there is the potential for conflict and obstruction or on the other hand, a mutual working relationship and understanding between landowners and the company, depending on how community issues (both positive and negative) are managed.

If not managed well, the community may obstruct the progress of the mine. For example, Fijian villagers on the island of Viti Levu put up roadblocks to obstruct access to Mt Kasi mine in protest for the fish kills that they believe the mine caused. Another example is from the Northern Territory in the late 1990s. In this case the traditional owners on Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory expressed their frustrations to the then Northern Territory Department of Mines and Energy through their land council (Anindilyakwa Land Council) about GEMCO's (Groote Eylandt Mining Company, BHP) performance with regard to rehabilitating old mining areas on their land. These were mined 20 or more years previously and had remained untouched. As a result, they refused to grant GEMCO's exploration licence applications. The landowners doubts towards the company was increased further by the media reports they saw about BHP's interests in Ok Tedi (BHP).

Indigenous people in Fiji and the Northern Territory usually want equity in new mining developments to enhance their economic development and employment opportunities. They also want to participate in the development of the mine. Simultaneously they expect compensation for the use and loss of their traditional land. Thus the closer the community is to the mine, the greater the opportunity for direct community participation. At the same time the mine can more directly contribute to community development by providing employment and training opportunities as well as supporting indigenous enterprises.

3.0 Social and economic impacts of the mining industry on indigenous communities in Fiji and the Northern Territory

It is generally assumed that social impacts are an outcome of mining. However, they already occur during exploration or earlier. Some of the negative impacts arise from misinformation or misunderstanding. For instance a geologist new to Fiji, was seen carrying out some exploration work unbeknown to the landowner who was instantly disturbed. Had the geologist formally met the landowner and delivered a "sevusevu" (kava for consumption in the introductory meeting) to discuss his intentions, the anxiety he caused may not have eventuated. In an example from Djilkminggan in the Northern Territory, the traditional owners were worried that the activities of substantial disturbance caused on their land may harm their cattle. Also many indigenous people do not have a clear understanding of what exploration and mining entails. This author has observed that many indigenous Territorians have the assumption that exploration will

always end up in mining - in reality, about 0.1% of all exploration activities result in mining in the Northern Territory. Similarly, some Fijian landowners have expressed to this author that they interpret exploration drilling as mining - they believe that the driller is bringing up gold and therefore expect some payment other than compensation for disturbance.

There are positive and negative social and economic impacts from mining. Positive impacts (benefits) can directly or indirectly transform into negative impacts (costs) if they are not well managed. The benefits and costs from mining for indigenous communities include:

- Increased employment and business opportunities requiring increased skills, education and training.
- Increased income, which in some communities has not been equitably, distributed resulting in resentment, inequality, and conflict within the community and breakdown of traditional values and hierarchy. In communities where this additional income has been mismanaged, dysfunctional behaviour, substance abuse, crime and health problems due to dietary changes have risen. However, if well managed it can be sustainable e.g. long-term investments.
- Improved roads. However improved roads in some areas have resulted in increased traffic and noise.
- Sponsorship and community assistance e.g. educational scholarships and financial support for local sports teams.
- Change of lifestyle and distribution of community responsibilities. e.g. Increased demand on women to work extended hours in the community gardens in Fiji. Their husbands, who are now occupied in exploration and mining work, formerly tended to these gardens. In the Northern Territory indigenous elders, some of who are senior citizens are spending many hours on site clearances and other mine related meetings that take them away from their family responsibilities.
- Pressures and stress experienced from the transition from a subsistence economy to a monetary economy. e.g. Increased consumption of commercial foods some of which are not as nutritious as traditional foods.

- Increased demand on the local community's time and resources e.g. time for consultation, local water resources.
- Reduced privacy for the community as a result of the increased attention that the mine attracts to the area.
- Anxiety as a result of inadequate consultation, misinformation and misinterpretation.

In both Fiji and the Northern Territory the issues are primarily based on social and economic concerns, environmental concerns, poor communication and lack of consultation. All of these issues could have been minimised had all the stakeholders been better informed and worked together particularly during negotiations and the early stages of exploration. Stakeholders need to be aware of each other's role and needs in a project. "Building alliances and partnerships between the State, the mining company and the community can help to avoid difficulties in mineral development...trying to avoid conflict is to everyone's advantage in the long run." (Miller 1996)

3.1 The Social Issues of Exploration and Mining in Fiji

In Fiji many of the social issues associated with exploration and mining are synonymous with other developments such as a major construction, tourism or forestry. In a 1998 study by the author (MRD), 540 social issues associated with the mining industry in Fiji were documented from various sources. These were categorised as follows;

- **(32%) Social – economic opportunities and issues.** These include matters concerning compensation, royalty payment, equity, enterprise development, employment, training, work conditions, financial assistance sponsorship and non financial assistance. e.g. "Landowners requested a road access fee to be paid by the company on a periodic basis".
- **(23%) Poor communication and lack of consultation** Not all stakeholders are informed sufficiently or consulted about the projects which has led to misinformation and misunderstanding. e.g. "Most requests are not up front at the first landowner meeting. Instead they are presented at different liaison (company / landowner) meetings." "Committee members do not pass on the information to the other landowners or the people in the village."

- **(16%) Environmental concerns** with reference to water contamination, toxic wastes, fish kills, loss of cultivable land, protection of the environment and rehabilitation measures. Also the effect of environmental damage on the livelihood of landowners, occupiers and villagers. e.g. "Landowners complained that drilling caused pollution in the river killing fish downstream. Landowners stated that they must be fully represented at all environmental meetings to keep them informed about what is going on."
- **(8%) Lack of awareness of the various aspects of the exploration and mining industry** including ownership of minerals and the technical aspects of the industry. Also the legislative and regulatory procedures and requirements involved in applying for an Exploration Licence. e.g. "Will a mine be built when this exploration work is completed? "Is there a substitute for copper?"
- **(6%) Social concerns** which include matters that impinge on traditional way of life, lifestyle, culture and values. e.g. Workers are concerned that they have to work on their Sabbath day. The men are no longer working in the gardens because they are too tired from their mining job.
- **(6%) Attitudes /conflicts with regard to exploration and mining** many of which were based on preconceived ideas about the industry or conflict with representatives from the industry based on lack of understanding from both parties. e.g. "Some landowner concerns stem from media reports about Bouganville and other major mining operations." "Landowners were not consulted prior to the development of a new road, which was built by the company on prime grazing and garden areas."
- **(5%) Land issues** refer to land ownership, access to land, compensation issues and the ownership of minerals. e.g. "The gravel payments are going to the wrong Mataqali (clan) because their boundary lines are not clearly defined." Sacred sites must be clearly identified and made known to the company."
- **(4%) Health and safety** concerns were in relation to on-site work and the effects of exploration and mining activity on the community. e.g. increased dust due to excess traffic associated with the mining project. "The company expressed concern that crew-members were not wearing safety gear."

3.2 The Social Issues of Exploration and Mining in the Northern Territory

The social issues listed above and expressed by Indigenous Fijians on the whole also apply to Indigenous people in the Northern Territory. However, for most Indigenous Territorians, land is the most important issue, particularly with regard to the desecration of sacred sites and access to land, followed by environmental concerns. The extent of their concerns is prioritised in descending according to the level of their significance;

- Land issues – desecration of sacred sites, losing their access to land they own, royalty payments going to the wrong people
- Environmental concerns – change in landscape, water contamination, loss and contamination of bush tucker in addition to those in listed for Fiji
- Social-economic opportunities and issues – as for Fiji
- Social concerns *- as for Fiji
- Health and Safety* -mainly health issues as a result of environmental damage
- Attitudes/conflicts with regard to exploration and mining* as for Fiji
- Poor communication and lack of consultation*- as for Fiji
- Lack of awareness about the various aspects of the exploration and mining industry*- as for Fiji

* Items in the previous list marked by an asterix indicate the priority of these items may differ between communities in the Northern Territory depending on community knowledge and experiences with mining.

4.0 Direct community participation to alleviate community concerns.

Direct community participation and involvement in the mine's development will help alleviate some of the community concerns already mentioned. Community participation will empower the community and encourage confidence and social equity. In return, the company will gain their support.

Due to their proximity, mines that exist nearby indigenous communities have a greater opportunity to encourage such participation at all stages of the mine development, from exploration

through to decommissioning in environmental management and social impact management. Such participation can be achieved in a number of ways through consultation, negotiation, inspection and monitoring as well as physical input in the form of employment, training, and access to community resources.

4.1 Community participation in environmental management.

Communities should be encouraged to take part in on-site inspections of areas being rehabilitated to witness progress and to address any concerns they may have about the work that has been done. On-site inspections can be an opportunity for the Indigenous community and the company to share their knowledge about the environment and to discuss future rehabilitation plans for the mine. Indigenous people should also be encouraged to take part in ongoing monitoring of flora and fauna and environmental indicators.

4.2 Community participation in social impact management.

Social impact management involves a social impact assessment and planning of the affected area (the site and surroundings of the mine) and the affected communities within it. Therefore it is imperative that indigenous people are given the opportunity to participate. A preliminary analysis must be carried out prior to the commencement of any exploration or mining activity to establish a baseline data for ongoing monitoring of social and economic impact and to measure any changes that may have occurred. The social impact planning identifies what strategies need to be implemented to address potential social issues. Strategies must be regularly evaluated to ascertain that they are effective or need to be modified or redesigned. The development of these strategies must involve extensive and consistent consultation with all stakeholders particularly the local community (landowner, occupier, and villagers) who are the most affected by the project. The "consultation should commence early in the project design, and be conducted in good faith according to procedures that encourage willing indigenous co-operation. It should contribute to project planning so that potential impacts are averted where possible in the early design stages." (Craig and Ehrlich 1996)

Indigenous communities can provide input into the process and be actively involved by identifying and confirming;

- the criteria for the baseline data and prioritising them according to their level of significance.

- the impact of other development activities in the affected area.
- the local attitudes and relationship with other developers in the affected area.
- the local perceptions, values, interests, concerns and aspirations particularly those with reference to the exploration and mining industry.
- the potential positive and negative impacts of the project.
- the strategies that need to be implemented to address the potential impacts.
- Short- and long-term plans for the community

Indigenous communities can also participate in the ongoing monitoring of social impact and the implementation of strategies that help mitigate negative social impact and facilitate communication and understanding. For instance, with some training and assistance from the company and government agencies, most communities can conduct their own surveys. Thereby participation gives indigenous communities ownership of the process of social impact management.

5.0 Conclusion

Social and economic impacts of any exploration and mining project are inevitable. However, as mining mainly occurs on indigenous land in Fiji and in the Northern Territory, indigenous communities will be the most affected. Therefore it is imperative that stakeholders - particularly the company, and the local community in the affected area of the proposed project - work together in partnership throughout the life of the project, to encourage the positive impacts and minimise the negative impacts associated with the project. This can be achieved by continuous social and economic planning, management and consultation throughout the life of the project, from the time of the granting of an Exploration Licence to post-decommissioning. All stakeholders must aim for a "win-win" situation so their needs are met with minimal conflict and cost (socially and economically). After all "a development project that clearly identifies and pursues the needs and wants of the company, the government and the community will in the long run be the most satisfactory and most profitable." (Miller 1996).

Finally, consider this: a Company starts a mine for economic gain. When the economics aren't viable, the company closes the mine and moves on. The company leaves the area. The mine has a finite life but the indigenous landowners have always been there and they must endure whatever has been left in the wake of the mine. The community lives on forever.

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