

# Engaging on the Ground: Site-level Community Engagement Practices in the Australian Minerals Industry

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## Abstract

This paper will present key findings from a comparative study of community engagement processes at Australian mining operations. The study, which is currently being undertaken by a team of University of Queensland researchers, is funded through the Australian Research Council and is being supported by four of Australia's leading mining companies. The focus of the study is on how community engagement is being practised 'on the ground' in the industry. There are eight mining and minerals processing operations involved in the research. Preliminary findings from six of these sites are reported in this paper as they related to:

- the rationale for community engagement from the operational perspective
- the nature of communications, informing or more interactive exchanges
- public cynicism and/or non-engagement
- understand and manage consultation fatigue
- diverse and/or fragmented communities.

Overall, these results illustrate that mining and minerals processing operations have multiple levels of motivation for engaging with their local communities. Effective community engagement relies heavily on the personal commitment by individual community engagement officers. However, the nature of community interaction is reliant on the support of the operation's general manager, and can vary markedly across operational areas.

Interaction with the different levels of local community — such as individuals, stakeholder groups and Shire representatives — varies widely in each case study. Many of the communities we visited needed support to engage with the mining operations in a formal manner. Public distrust and cynicism toward large corporations can be addressed; for example, by demonstrating respect for community concerns. Most community interviewees were 'matter of fact' about the benefits companies receive from community engagement and community support, expressing neither an overt distrust nor a naïve faith in the company goodwill.

## **Keywords**

Community engagement, stakeholder engagement, corporate social responsibility, mining and community, stakeholder communications, business and society

## **Introduction**

For the past three decades the mining and minerals processing industry has undergone a metamorphosis related to how it does business. In the broadest terms, the 1970s and 1980s saw the development of occupational health and safety as a priority in the industry, where death and injury became inexcusable events and the development of a safety culture became a priority in all operations. During the 1990s, the mining industry became serious about its environmental performance, even as it struggled with legacy issues of abandoned mines and poor environmental practice. As it moved into the new millennium, the mining industry's response to the demands of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was the next major change in how it does business.

One important aspect of CSR is how large multinational corporations relate to the local communities in which they operate. Understanding how the mining industry enacts CSR at the local level is the focus of the current research. This paper presents some preliminary findings from the project, *Site Level Community Engagement Processes in the Australian Minerals Industry: A Comparative Analysis*. The project is being conducted over three years by a team of researchers from the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining, the University of Queensland Business School and the University of Queensland School of Social Science. It is funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant, with contributions from five industry sponsors — BHP Billiton and BHP Billiton Stainless Steel, Newcrest Mining, Newmont Australia and Rio Tinto.

The focus of the project is on how community engagement is being practised 'on the ground' — that is, at an operational level — in the minerals industry in Australia. A key objective of this study is to describe and assess site-level community engagement processes in the minerals industry, using a comparative case study approach. This includes understanding the communication and relationship management practices that mining and minerals processing operations currently employ, and the assumptions and expectations underpin these practices. The study also seeks to identify good practice in the area of community relations between large companies and local communities.

Although there is a substantial international literature dealing with the social and environmental impacts of large-scale resource and infrastructure developments on local communities, this tends to focus on the social impact assessment of the development (Joyce and MacFarlane 2001) rather than on analysing the communication and engagement strategies employed by companies. Published Australian research for example, on the social dynamics of traditional mining communities, focuses primarily on relations between companies and their employees in the context of company towns (for example Williams 1981; Gibson 1991). Most of this research has marginal relevance to 'fly-in, fly-out'

operations, or to those sites that are located near larger provincial centres with a diverse economic base.

## **Context: the Australian minerals industry**

### ***Competing pressures***

The Australian minerals industry has a history of boom and bust economic cycles, which has consequences for the development and operation of mines, subsequent employment opportunities, and social effects in the local communities in which they operate. For example, during the late 1990s falling resource prices and increased competition resulted in large-scale re-structuring, 'downsizing' exercises, and mine closures. Changes in work patterns included the move toward 12-hour rosters and continuous operations (Heiler et al. 2000). Since 1979 there has also been an increased use of long-distance commuting arrangements in preference to establishing new single industry mining towns (Maxwell 2001; Newton and Parin 1983; Storey 2001). The current boom cycle, due to high commodity prices, has seen many new projects come on line and a marked labour shortage in all skills areas (Roberts 2003).

The sector has also faced growing demands from regulatory agencies, non-government organisations, the media, and local communities to improve its social and environmental performance (AMEEF 2002). The industry's relatively high level of public scrutiny stems from the history and visibility of the environmental impacts of mining, and its history of negative social legacies, such as mining ghost towns and dispossession of Indigenous people from their lands (Banerjee 2000; AMEEF 2002; CAER 2004). Internationally, human rights and environmental organisations have focussed attention on poor industry practice (Ballard and Banks 2003). Thus, the minerals industry, both in Australia and internationally, faces multiple and conflicting pressures.

The minerals industry, in Australia and internationally, has taken several initiatives aimed at better managing these competing pressures and improving its public standing. These measures include adopting voluntary codes of practice (see for example MCA 2004; ICMM 2003), formulating company-specific policies that emphasise corporate social responsibility and sustainable development, improved public reporting, and increasing efforts to engage with critics and external stakeholders. These measures conform with the recommendations of the industry-funded Mining, Minerals and Sustainable Development project, which provided a comprehensive change agenda for the industry ahead of the Rio+10 conference in Johannesburg (IIED 2002).

Under the Sustainable Development Framework issued by the International Council of Mines and Metals (ICMM 2003), signatory companies are expected to contribute to the social, economic and institutional development of the communities in which they operate. Similarly, the Minerals Council of Australia has developed a voluntary sustainable development code — Enduring Value (MCA 2004), which extends the scope of the industry's previous code (the Australian Minerals Industry Code of Environmental Management) launched in 1998. Among other safety, environmental, and product

stewardship commitments, signatories undertake to “implement effective and transparent engagement, communication and independently verified reporting arrangements with our stakeholders” (MCA 2004, p. 19).

In addition to these international and national commitments, most of the larger companies in the sector, including this project’s industry partners, have internal policies requiring individual operations to address local community issues. BHP Billiton and Rio Tinto, for example, now require all of their sites to adopt community relations plans. Newmont Australia has a highly structured process for regularly auditing and reporting on the community performance of each mine site. An increasing number of mining and minerals processing operations are employing specialist community relations personnel (Kemp 2004) and have established formal engagement mechanisms, such as community consultative committees and advisory panels. However, the community relations function is less integrated with other management systems compared to the management of health, safety and environmental concerns.

Although mining companies may be responding in part to criticisms of the industry as being secretive and unresponsive, some authors argue that clear business benefits accrue to companies from building better relations with local communities. They argue that good community relations reduces the risk of projects being delayed or blocked by local opposition, promotes smoother relations with regulatory authorities, increases the industry’s ability to recruit locally, raises workforce morale, and increases the potential to harness local geological knowledge (Cavanagh and Prowse n.d.; Humphreys 2000).

While these developments signal a significant change at the corporate level in how mining companies seek to interact with local communities, industry personnel acknowledge that there is only limited knowledge in the industry about how to practise community engagement ‘on the ground’. There is also little known about how sites determine whether they are sufficiently responsive to community needs and concerns, and about whether community relations are actually improving as a consequence. Apart from two studies of limited scope undertaken for the Australian component of the MMSD project (Cheney et al. 2002; URS 2002), these issues have not yet attracted the attention of researchers. There may be two reasons for this lack of attention. Firstly, the developments outlined above are quite recent, and secondly, there are sizeable cost and logistical difficulties involved in conducting site-based research within the industry.

## **Methodology**

This study utilises a case analysis approach (Yin 1989) to compare and contrast the salient issues of community engagement within and between eight mining and minerals processing sites. At the time of writing, six of these sites had been visited by researchers. This paper reports on the preliminary findings from these six participating sites.

In each of the case study sites, the following data collection techniques are employed:

1. An initial desktop mapping exercise to identify: a) available demographic and economic data about the community, b) key groups and organisations within the relevant community, c) the history of social change in the community, and d) the main points of formal and informal contact between company personnel and community members.
2. Analysis of relevant corporate records, such as formal community relations plans, minutes of meetings, outcomes of internal reviews, complaints files and company sponsored surveys.
3. Semi-structured interviews with approximately 20 people for each case study. These interviews involve company personnel and community members. The interviews with company personnel seek to identify the experiences and opinions of individuals who are formally responsible for community engagement on-site, as well as employees who have an informal involvement with the community. The interviews with community members are conducted with the aim of maximising a diversity of views and experience with the site. For example, interviewees include local government representatives (e.g. mayor, CEO), representatives of community groups and organisations (including NGOs), near neighbours, and critics of the operation.

Data is also collected from two other sources: participant observation of community meetings, and an employee survey. Findings from these components are not reported in this paper.

### ***Characteristics of interview participants***

Our approach to identifying potential interview participants was to develop a sample of interviewees who represented a broad range of experiences and views of community engagement processes at each site (within the limitations of the study's resources). We generated a framework to assist in creating a comparable set of interviews across the eight case studies. A simple, overarching question guided our approach. We wanted to know "Who engages about what, and with whom?"

We sought to discover the different aspects of community engagement arising from the mining company's business activities. This included the more obvious roles of community engagement officer<sup>1</sup>, and the mine manager. However, we were also interested in the views of individuals in other roles, who have some contact with members of the community. For example, such roles include the exploration geologist, environmental officer, contract supervisor, purchasing officer, human resources manager, and emergency services coordinator. In addition, interviews were conducted with workforce representatives at each site.

From the community perspective, we sought interviews with people who would represent as wide a range of opinions as possible. We also sought to ensure the interview data was comparable across the different case studies. To achieve this we contacted individuals from the following groups:

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<sup>1</sup> None of the mining company employees involved in community engagement held the title 'community engagement officer'. A range of position titles covered this role such as; Manager, Environment and Community; Manager HSEC; External Affairs Supervisor; External Relations Supervisor; Specialist, Community Relations and so on.

- Those with an elected or professional role in the relationships between the community and the mine, such as the Shire Mayor, CEO or appropriate Ward Councillor
- Those who have a formal relationship with the mine through their roles in community groups, such as a community consultative committee
- Representatives of non-government organisations in the community who may have some involvement or history with the mining operation, such as landcare groups
- Community members whose role put them in contact with a cross section of the community but who may not have any contact with the mining operation, such as a school principal, local newspaper editor, local police sergeant, Chamber of Commerce president or other community group
- Neighbours to the site, or owners of adjoining properties
- Individuals who had made complaints about the case study site.

The researchers made every effort to contact the Traditional Owners of the land under the mining lease, though a formal interview was not always possible.

### ***Characteristics of participating sites***

Participating sites were classified into one of three groups, based on the site's location relative to the nearest town — 'Urban fringe', 'Rural' and 'Remote' (see Table 1).

'Urban fringe' sites were located adjacent to residential suburbs or areas of rural subdivision. In this context a neighbour could be a suburban family or a hobby farmer, and could also be an employee at the mine site.

'Rural' sites were located in the countryside within an hours drive of the nearest town or urban centre. At these sites nearly all the workforce lived in the nearby town. Neighbours to 'rural' mines were usually pastoralists or graziers.

'Remote' sites were located too far away from population centres for the workforce to commute on a daily basis. In these cases the workforce flew to the site for a series of workdays and then flew home for a rest period. At these sites the nearest town and the residential locations of the workforce were typically hundreds of kilometres apart. Neighbours to these mining operations were generally graziers.

**Table 1. Participating sites**

| Site No.              | Proximity    | Coal / metalliferous | underground / open cut   | Years of operation | Yrs to closure |
|-----------------------|--------------|----------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Site 1                | Urban fringe | Coal                 | Underground              | 20+ years          | 2 years        |
| Site 2                | Urban fringe | Processing Plant     | Refinery                 | 20+ years          | —              |
| Site 3                | Urban fringe | Processing Plant     | Refinery                 | 0-5 years          | —              |
| Site 4                | Rural        | Metalliferous        | Open cut                 | 5-10 years         | 20 years       |
| Site 5 (not included) | Rural        | Coal                 | Underground              | 5-10 years         | 10 years       |
| Site 6                | Rural        | Metalliferous        | Underground              | 10-15 years        | 4 years        |
| Site 7 (not included) | Remote       | Metalliferous        | Underground              | 5-10 years         | 10 years       |
| Site 8                | Remote       | Metalliferous        | Underground and open cut | 10-15 years        | 4 years        |

Note: Participating sites are not identified in this paper. Case study data collection for Site 5 and Site 7 is in progress at the time of writing, and are not included in these preliminary findings.

This classification system, based on proximity to the population centre, distinguishes three different types of geographical relationship between the workforce, the local community, and the mining operation. Mining and minerals operations are also characterised by industry sector (coal, metalliferous ore, or minerals processing plant), type of operation (underground, open cut or smelter), and mine life.

Coal mines are different to metalliferous mines in terms of length of mine life and in terms of industrial history. Open cut mines create more surface disturbance than underground mines, and mines with a short operational life (5-15 years) have a different impact on the local communities than mines with a longer operational 'life'. Transience is one of the key factors that leads to the boom and bust cycle of mining towns and distinguishes mining from other industries on which communities may rely. For example, industries such as agriculture or manufacturing have no defined or in-built operational life, so once established, these industries can continue for generations. The two processing plants in this study share this characteristic of having an indefinite operational life. For the other six case studies, the operational life is determined by the extent of the resource underground. In this study the importance of planning for mine closure was an issue in three of the case studies.

## Results

This section reports some of the initial results from our site visits. In presenting these results, we have focussed on four themes that were identified as posing challenges in the practice of community engagement at the commencement of the study. However, a comprehensive account of the entire project is beyond the scope of this paper. These results represent our initial analysis of six of the case studies<sup>2</sup>. This paper forms one of a number of planned outputs from the study. Taken together, we anticipate that results from the project will improve our understanding of community engagement processes in both public and private sectors of society.

### 1. Why engage? The rationale for community engagement

A key issue to be addressed in the study is to understand the rationale behind community engagement at the mine sites. It was apparent to us that the motivations could be very different in the corporate, public and individual spheres. How mining companies engaged with their local communities was affected by how the question, “Why engage?”, was answered at the different levels of the organisation and within the community.

From the perspective of the mining operation, community engagement was often discussed in terms of risk management. Interviewees from one site saw their local community as a potential catastrophic risk (Site 1). At this site, an underground coalmine, there was considerable community opposition to future mine plans because of the possibility of damage to the environment. There was also considerable resentment due to earlier subsidence damage to surface structures and creek beds. At this site a consultant had been hired to guide the community engagement process, and a community consultative committee (CCC) had been formed with the express purpose of resolving issues about the future mine plan, and to resolve any of the day to day operational issues.

In this case, site management saw community engagement primarily as an exercise in risk management. They had a clear agenda — to change the mine plans as little as possible in order to maximise extraction of the resource. The situation was quite adversarial, which undermined the ‘nicer’ objectives of community engagement; such as mutual identification of problems, generating solutions and maximising opportunities.

Community engagement in this type of context is qualitatively different to less conflictive situations. For example, distrust becomes less of an abstract issue and more of a personal issue. The members of the CCC may be distrusted by sections in the wider community because of their involvement in discussions with the mining operation. Furthermore, community relations staff may not feel confident about speaking on behalf of mine management, or may be concerned about being the public face of

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<sup>2</sup> The participating operations, and their associated communities, are not identified in this paper. To facilitate the use of this material with other outputs of the Community Engagement Project, the numbering for the case studies will be consistent with that in Table 1.

the mining operation — defending management decisions to the community over which they have no input or control.

Two other sites, Site 3 and Site 4, identified community opposition as a potential risk, but had moved beyond this position at the time of our site visit. Management at these sites now saw community relations as an opportunity to develop mutually beneficial partnerships. Both these sites had long future operational lives of twenty or more years. An investment in community relations was perceived to have direct benefit in terms of attracting and retaining a skilled workforce, and accruing reputable benefit that would support the company's future development opportunities in other areas. These two sites might be considered to be engaging in the 'new generation' approach to community relations, where looking for opportunities and working with community stakeholders is part of operational thinking and planning from the start of the mine project.

The remaining three sites, Site 2, Site 6 and Site 7 were using their participation in the project to help re-assess their approach to community engagement. Site 2 and Site 7 had histories of distant community relationships. Historically Site 6 had a philanthropic relationship with the local community. For two of these sites, the impetus toward an engagement model of community relations was driven primarily from their legal responsibilities toward the traditional owners of the land under the mine lease.

Within this study, the proximity of the community appeared to have little impact on whether or how the community was engaged. Rather, the manner of engagement appeared to be shaped by the business objectives of the site, the social issues at hand, and the history of prior community engagement. For example, four of the six participating sites were constrained in their approach to community relations by a legacy of paternalistic and reactive dealings with the community.

## **2. Communication: information dissemination or dialogue?**

We analysed the interview data for the incidence of one-way communication, two-way communications (or dialogue) and engaged communications. One-way communication is where one party informs another about their observations, opinions or decisions. While there may be some brief exchanges, the predominant flow of information — and therefore influence — is from one party to another. Many of our everyday interactions are predominantly one-way processes, for example, when we seek the opinion of an expert, like a doctor, teacher or accountant. In mine-community relationships, a one-way communication is usually evident in unilateral decision making by the site management with regard to issues that affect the community. Everything from the choice of where to place monetary donations through to changes in the mine plans can be communicated in a one-way manner. Two-way communications are where information is passed from the community to the mining operations and back again, but it falls short of developing a shared understanding of an issue. Often the way complaints are handled is an example of this.

However, the term 'community engagement' carries with it connotations of joint problem definition, shared responsibility in generating solutions and cooperation in maximising opportunities. As researchers, we considered that listening to, and respecting, the other's point of view was a necessary pre-requisite for community engagement of this type. Therefore we looked for evidence of a 'genuine' dialogue in our case studies. We defined genuine dialogue as both parties listening to the point of view of the other, as well as putting forward their own point of view. The terms 'engaged communication' or 'genuine dialogue' recognise that this type of communication is qualitatively different to a series of one-way exchanges.

At the organisational level, we observed that most of the interactions between the mining operations and the community were a sequence of one-way communications. In part, this reflected a perceived need of the mining operations to tell the communities about what they do. This was done through such things as newsletters, information nights, open days, donations programs and awards.

Some of these events however, did translate into genuine dialogues. For example, Site 4 held six-monthly information nights. What made them more of a genuine dialogue rather than an information evening was that (a) the information to be discussed was distributed in the weeks prior to the meeting in newsletter form, (b) individual community members' relationships with the mine were ongoing between meetings, and (c) decision makers attended the meeting, ensuring that, some issues could be resolved immediately. This enabled more of a discussion to develop between the gathered local community members and the mine staff at the meeting.

From the point of view of the community contacting the mining operation, few of the communities we visited had either the resources or the organisational framework to speak to the mining operation collectively about their vision or strategic planning. Even where the local government was sophisticated and had a community vision and plan, this did not always result in a 'genuine dialogue' between it and the mining or minerals operation on its doorstep. Rather, CEOs and Mayors of these shire councils were more inclined to speak to researchers about what they could get from the mining operation on behalf of their citizens in a type of horse-trading. This was coupled with a sequence of one-way information exchanges with the mine. For example, the local government at Site 1 did not discuss the mining industry in its planning documents, and the shire councillor we interviewed was primarily concerned with better road safety in his town. At Site 7, the mayor had no dialogue with any of the three mines in the shire. The public officials interviewed for Site 2 and Site 3 did not discuss any version of partnership with the minerals sector.

Only one local government (Site 3) had a structure for engaging directly with industry. The mayor in one other case study recounted a partnership project with the mining company (Site 4) in which the town's waste water was re-used in the ore treatment plant. This helped alleviate a disposal problem for the shire and provided a guaranteed supply of water for the processing plant at the mine.

Some mining operations had facilitated the process of genuine dialogue with particular stakeholder groups by providing resources or power sharing. For example, Site 1 provided resources to a community consultative committee to gain a community perspective on controversial mine expansion plans. This included hiring an independent consultant to run community meetings, discussed earlier. Sites 1, 3 and 4 each developed community groups where the governance structure shared power with the community members. While these groups had some mine representation, they were controlled by community members (Sites 1 and 3 established Community Development Funds that were community controlled, and Site 4 established a landcare group for the management of a catchment area that was partially on the mine lease.)

At the individual level, four of the sites had community relations personnel who developed genuine dialogues between their community relations staff and members of the local community. Community relations personnel from Site 2 had no clear examples of genuine dialogue, despite some ongoing issues such as visual amenity, encroachment by suburbs and protecting ground water supply. These issues will continue for the life of the operation. Community relations at this site could best be described as distant and controlled.

At the other five sites, the personal commitment of the community relations staff (usually one person) was a crucial factor in creating opportunities for genuine dialogue. Some community relations personnel operated primarily in a dialogue mode (Sites 3, 4 and, to some extent, 6). Other community relations staff only rarely moved beyond a one-way communication process. For example, at Sites 6 and 8 the community relations staff utilised their problem solving and organising strengths, often with little input from community members. This approach was associated with a 'silo' mentality towards community relations at the operational level. That is, community relations were seen to be the province of community relations staff, and other mine staff did not get involved either formally or informally.

The proximity of the participating sites to the nearest town did not appear to have any bearing on whether a 'genuine' dialogue developed between the site and their local community.

### **3. Dealing with public distrust, cynicism and/or non-engagement**

In three of the six case studies discussed in this paper (Site 2, Site 3, and Site 4), we observed very little cynicism. These sites had a generally positive reputation among the community participants to the study. At Site 2 it was apparent that a significant turnaround in attitudes had occurred during the past five years. Site 2 had been described as a 'fortress' by community interviewees as a 'fortress'. This site was one of those that still favoured paternalistic forms of community interaction, and management seemed unsure what to do about more persistent issues, such as those to do with ground water management.

One case, Site 3, had only recently commenced operations after a three-year construction period. This site had faced a legacy of public distrust and cynicism from the community's experiences with other large minerals-related companies in the past. The community feared that Site 3 would be 'just another big company' coming to take what it wanted regardless of community opinion, and they were prepared to fight against the development of Site 4, particularly on issues of environmental amenity. The management of Site 4 made a concerted effort to minimise public cynicism and overcome distrust; firstly, by engaging the community from day one in a dialogue about what was going to happen; and secondly, by demonstrating public responsibility through its responses to public concerns. This included, for example, listening to concerns over the loss of remnant habitat on the construction site and undertaking a site landscaping process that featured species identification, local seed collection before construction, propagation and replanting the site with local species. Because of these efforts community participants generally felt that the site was a better 'corporate citizen' than other companies, and the prospect of a second stage was regarded as a good option for the future of the community.

Some community participants had adopted a 'pragmatic' approach to the presence of the mining operation in their community that led them to try to get the greatest benefit from the mine's presence. For example, Site 8 was located in a remote region where a number of other mines also operated. One community participant was quite open about approaching each mine in turn and trying to raise the highest bid for support, in this case for an education and training program. Thus, it could be argued that both 'sides' can use the relationship for their own interests.

Most interviewees were 'matter of fact' about the benefits companies receive from community engagement and community support, neither expressing an overt distrust or a naïve faith in the company goodwill. Nonetheless, there is a risk that a rationale for community engagement that relies heavily on the 'business case' can engender cynicism within the local community and be seen to be primarily self-serving. The business case has been critiqued as an inadequate rationale for socially and environmentally responsible corporate behaviours (for example, Banerjee 2000; Korhonen 2002; Korhonen 2003). However, the interplay between the business case as a sometimes convenient rationale, and the normative motivation for socially responsible behaviour is less well understood. Future outputs of this study seek to further articulate the interplay between pragmatic and ethical motivations for corporate social responsibility.

Significant distrust and cynicism in the community were observed at Site 1, Site 8, and to some extent among the Indigenous participants at Site 3. At Site 1, a community consultative committee (CCC) was formed to discuss future mine plans. The committee had been in existence of two years at the time of the case study visit. The interviewees who were not members of the CCC thought the committee process was a public relations exercise, while the individuals who were members of the committee saw themselves acting as self-appointed representatives for the wider community and working very hard to protect their environmental concerns. Other community groups had formed

outside the CCC process and a schism was emerging in the community. Community relations personnel had identified non-involvement of the wider community as an issue and a series of open meetings were planned to re-engage with the wider community.

In undertaking our research, we intentionally interviewed 'active' community members, some of whom were involved in mine-related work, while others were not. These respondents are already 'engaged' with their own community to some extent. Thus, the perspectives of non-engaged sections in the community are not directly assessed by this research. However, non-engagement by key sectors of the community was still an issue at four Sites. At Sites 1, 4, 6 and 8, company interviewees expressed frustration at the lack of community participation on certain issues.

Sometimes non-involvement is a sign of community acceptance. One example was at Site 3. Initially this site held formal regular community meetings. Over the three years prior to our study, the meetings had devolved into an occasional barbecue. In this case the community had argued they did not need another formal meeting to the ones they were already committed to. In response, community relations staff made a decision to join existing community groups rather than try to draw together a community consultative committee exclusively to address the operational issues at Site 3. The barbecue was a neighbourly gesture for those interested in operational activities at Site 3.

#### **4. How do participating sites engage with highly diverse or fragmented communities?**

We considered the level of diversity and fragmentation within the communities that were the subject of the case studies, and whether this was recognised by the participating mining operations.

The communities near to Sites 1, 2 and 4 were relatively homogeneous. Based on ABS census data, cultural or ethnic diversity was not a feature of these communities, nor was it commented on during the interviews. Cultural diversity was more apparent at those sites where Aboriginal people formed a sizeable minority of the community (Sites 3, 6 and 8).

Fragmentation reflects a schism between social groups, such that there is either animosity, or an absence of connection. Such inter-group relationships were either observed by researchers or commented upon by interviewees at Sites 1, 6, and 8. The issues at Site 1 have been discussed earlier.

The community at Site 6 was split into a large non-Indigenous population, comprising town residents and pastoralists, and Aboriginal residents. The Aboriginal residents were further divided along family lines as members of one or other of the two Traditional Owner groups associated with the mine lease. Interviewees from the white community did not refer to the Aboriginal people who lived along side them, and the public culture in the town (for example tourist information, art galleries, and public art) made no mention of the aboriginal history or culture of the area. Interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members was not observed by researchers, or recounted by participants.

The Aboriginal interviewees were similarly distant, or uninvolved with the town. In this case, employment with the mining operation was one of the very few opportunities that members of the two cultures interacted around a common endeavour.

Sites 6 and 8 are diverse and fragmented. At the local township in Site 8, more than half the population is Indigenous, comprising members of five different indigenous community groups. The white community and the Indigenous community interact well in some ways, for example in the running of the health service, and there is a history of good working relationships between station owners and station hands. However, inter-family tensions between Indigenous groups and ongoing resentments toward some of the white people in town (in this case, the publican) have created deep schisms in the community that have led to violence. At this site, a remote FIFO operation, the mine company had kept its distance from the local community until very recently. It would be fair to say that, so far, the company's efforts at relating to a community with this degree of fragmentation produced little obvious reward.

However, it does not follow that a diverse community is also a fragmented one. For example, the community in case study Site 3 was diverse, but not fragmented. Site 3 comprises a large regional town nearby, as well as two small local communities near the site. Additionally, the area has a relatively small, dispersed Aboriginal population (three per cent), only some of whom claim to be Traditional Owners to the area. Aboriginal community participants expressed considerably less satisfaction with the site than did non-Indigenous community participants. However, they also appeared to be knowledgeable of, and involved in, many aspects of the community. In contrast a relatively homogenous community can be fragmented, such as in Site 1.

Considering the six case studies, the different minerals operations demonstrated very different approaches to engaging with diverse or fragmented communities, to varying degrees of success.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, these results illustrate the nature and diversity of community engagement processes as practised by individual operations of large mining companies in Australia. Mining operations have multiple motivations for engaging with their local communities including, for instance, the high level of personal commitment by individual community engagement officers, and the organisational commitment provided through mission statements and strategic objectives of the parent company. However, the motivation for community involvement by operational managers on site is the critical factor in determining the nature and extent of the sites' community engagement practices.

At the organisational level, the interactions that we observed between the mining operations and their communities were mostly a sequence of one-way communications. Many of the communities we visited needed support to engage with the mining operations. This is an area that the minerals companies may need to include as part of their community engagement strategy, rather than

expecting the community to match them in business skills such as planning, opportunity assessment and so on.

Most interviewees were 'matter of fact' about the benefits companies receive from community engagement and community support, expressing neither an overt distrust nor a naïve faith in the company goodwill. Nonetheless there is a risk that operations that rely solely on a business case rationale for their community involvement can engender cynicism within the communities they are purporting to help. Public distrust and cynicism toward large corporations can be addressed by: entering into a dialogue with the community about the operation, its plans and what this means for community members; demonstrating respect for community concerns through the operation's responses to those concerns; and ensuring that there is congruence between how staff involved in community relations behave and operational decisions.

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