



The effect of community consultation on perceptions of a proposed mine: A case study from southeast Australia



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ABSTRACT

Consultation is the predominant method of community engagement in infrastructure development. Therefore, understanding stakeholder interactions within consultation is critical to acquiring a social licence to operate. While previous research has focused on the factors which contribute to this social licence, little work has been conducted on how mining company consultation strategies influence perception formation. We explore how stakeholder expectations and experience of consultation impact perceptions of proposed mining projects. We undertook a case study of a proposed, large-scale, mineral sands mine in rural Australia using an open and closed-question questionnaire ($n = 32$) and semi-structured interviews ($n = 20$). We find that there are multiple, diverging understandings of the purpose of consultation both within and between stakeholder groups. The community experience of consultation drove negative perceptions of the proposed mine due to procedural and personal factors. We find several overlaps with the renewable energy (RE) literature, including: calls for two-way communication, (mis)trust of professional stakeholders, and the need for consistent and well-timed consultation. Other factors are not as common in the RE literature, and may be more specific to mining, such as stakeholder disenfranchisement misunderstood as apathy, calls for community involvement in agenda setting, the need for careful selection of company representatives, and the importance of meeting stakeholder expectations of consultation.

1. Introduction

Mining continues to be a widespread and economically important activity in many countries. Understanding the factors that shape a community's perception towards proposed mines is critical for countries such as Australia, where stakeholder relations can often be strained. The direct and secondary impacts of mining have been explored for both developing and developed countries (Esteves, 2008; Petkova et al., 2009; Franks et al., 2010; Lawson and Bentil, 2014), as have public perceptions towards established mining projects (Mason et al., 2014; Martín et al., 2014). Much of this existing focus has been on the engagement of indigenous populations (Barber and Jackson, 2012; Fulmer, 2014), the concept of corporate social responsibility for mining (Owen and Kemp, 2014; Kotilainen et al., 2015), and the social licence to operate for mines (Prno, 2013; Holley and Mitcham, 2016). Here we develop this literature further, by exploring how expectations and experience of consultation impact stakeholder perceptions of proposed mining projects.

Within the renewable energy (RE) literature, there have been many

studies on stakeholder perceptions of proposed and existing projects. These studies generally focus on factors such as: communication (Dütschke, 2011); stakeholder remuneration (Miner, 2009); background and context (Jobert et al., 2007); transparency and trust (Siegrist and Cvetkovich, 2000); and, fairness (Ellis, 2004; Booth and Halseth, 2011). Although we can draw from the RE literature, there are distinct differences between mine developments and RE projects which impact perceptions, with the former often having a far greater impact on the soils and landscape, as well as a longer lifecycle (van der Plank et al. 2016). As a result, it is likely that community perceptions and expectations of involvement in mining projects differ from those associated with RE.

A social licence to operate – most simply described as community acceptance of a project – is increasingly recognised as necessary and beneficial to mining and other developments (Paragreen and Woodley, 2013; Prno, 2013). Meaningful consultation helps to ensure a more just social development practice, and helps to accumulate knowledge on how communities want to be involved in infrastructural projects. In the RE literature, community and individual perceptions of their involve-

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ment can affect their acceptance of a project as a whole (Corscadden et al., 2012), with projects risking delay or cancellation due to local opposition (Jobert et al., 2007; Dütschke, 2011).

The relationship between participation and acceptance is relatively straightforward. Public participation in the planning process impacts community perceptions of a project in a largely positive manner (Jobert et al., 2007; Booth and Halseth, 2011; Coleby et al., 2009). Both the means and ends for consultation must be considered, since there are multiple goals and approaches to be considered (Campbell and Marshall, 2000; Vaidya and Mayer, 2014). This makes developing a successful engagement strategy a complex process (Buchy and Race, 2001; Vaidya and Mayer, 2014). Collier and Scott (2010) explored community engagement, focussing on environmental discourse in a mined landscape. They found that while focus groups were effective for gathering data and stimulating discussion, their facilitation and organisation proved difficult. The choice of consultation design is also important (Buchy and Race, 2001; Carr and Halvorsen, 2001), with context, timing, perceived honesty, and fairness all affecting community interpretation of consultation efforts (Smith and McDonough, 2001; Ellis, 2004; Booth and Halseth, 2011). There has been a focus on the need for continued improvement in the area of community engagement (Tang-Lee, 2016), with a special focus on the relationship between corporate governance, firm performance, and the extent and depth of community engagement (Lin et al., 2015). The literature also emphasises that mining companies must reposition themselves to a more central position within mine-stakeholder networks (Dobelet et al., 2014).

Despite the emphasis on the importance of stakeholder engagement, to the best of our knowledge there has been no research on the impact of consultation on a community's response to proposed mines. New analytical frameworks for renewable energy (RE) have also largely not been applied to mining research. In this paper, we investigate the influence of community consultation efforts on perceptions of the planning process, the mining company, and the project as a whole. This paper proceeds as follows: first, we review the key factors which impact the acceptance of infrastructural projects; second, we present the methods and data of our case study in rural Victoria, Australia; and finally we present and discuss our results. We will address the following two questions in the course of the paper:

- (a) How do stakeholder expectations of involvement compare to their actual experience of consultation for a proposed project?
- (b) How did the community consultation strategy affect individual stakeholder perceptions of the proposed mining project?

2. Community attitudes and consultation of infrastructure projects

2.1. Factors driving attitudes towards developments

Within the RE literature, Jobert et al. (2007) outline two categories of factors that are influential in the formation of attitudes towards wind energy projects: (a) institutional conditions such as regulatory and economic settings; and (b) personal, psychological and contextual site-specific conditions related to place attachment, identity, visual impact, and economic gains (these latter conditions are described further in Devine-Wright, 2007). Here we outline these factors further.

In terms of institutional conditions, trust in regulatory agencies can strongly influence risk and benefit perceptions (Siegrist and Cvetkovich, 2000; Bronfman et al., 2012). Regulatory requirements as to the choice of consultation method and the effectiveness of communication can also impact perception development (Jobert et al., 2007; Dütschke, 2011). For example, public meetings are often used as a participatory tool, yet they rarely achieve their goal of empowering community members in decision making (Adams, 2004). The timing of initial consultations can be similarly crucial in fostering a

positive or negative reception – generally the sooner, the better – and likewise the timing of information releases impact existing opposition to a proposed project (Jobert et al., 2007; Connor et al., 2009; Dütschke, 2011). Economic incentives such as employment and direct community benefits have been found to increase acceptance of RE projects (Devine-Wright, 2007; Tokushige et al., 2007; Badera and Kocoń, 2014). However, the manner in which benefits are offered, such as the timing of the benefits package, as well as the perceived suitability of the persons managing the package, can positively or negatively influence community perception of the benefits (Cass et al., 2010; Cowell et al., 2011; Munday et al., 2011).

In terms of personal, psychological, and contextual conditions, factors such as: context; perceived honesty; and, fairness can affect the public's interpretation of a consultation attempt. These may have a direct influence on both public acceptance and overall outcomes of a specific project (Ellis, 2004; Jobert et al., 2007; Booth and Halseth, 2011). Within personal and psychological factors, place attachment is considered to offer a more accurate and nuanced explanation for local opposition than oversimplified Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) reasoning (Cass and Walker, 2009; Devine-Wright, 2009). Place attachment is an emotional bond to a place which may include a mix of landscape, social, and cultural values. Trust also appears to be a key factor and negative perceptions can be formed when the community's trust in the planning authorities or companies is low (Moffat and Zhang, 2014). This lack of trust is often caused by a perceived deficit of community involvement, bias towards certain stakeholders, or inequality in benefit distribution (Gross, 2007; Jobert et al., 2007). With an increase in trust, perceptions may be more positive, and risk perceptions of the development can be reduced (Devine-Wright, 2007; Tokushige et al., 2007; Wüstenhagen et al., 2007). Fairness is another key consideration as community members often comment that the benefits of a project go to the few private landholders whose property is directly utilized for the development, while the negative impacts are experienced by the rest of the community (Gross, 2007; Jobert et al., 2007; van der Plank et al., 2016).

2.2. The social licence

In the context of energy and mining projects, the approval to operate is often termed a social licence. A social licence to operate can best be described as an informal indication of a community's acceptance of a development, although this may range from "reluctant acceptance to a relationship based on high levels of trust" (Owen and Kemp, 2013, p. 31). Social licences can be granted by various stakeholder groups, and a licence from one group does not translate to approval from all stakeholder groups (Dare et al., 2014). For example, while a wide group of stakeholders, including state government and markets, may find a project acceptable, local government and non-governmental groups, or local businesses and community members, may be less accepting and withhold a social licence (Dare et al., 2014). As described above, various factors influence the granting of this licence. These include context, relationships, sustainability, local benefits and participation, and adaptability (Prno, 2013); they also include power imbalances between stakeholder groups within the planning process, and the process of distributing potential benefits (Paragreen and Woodley, 2013). Owen and Kemp (2013) remain critical of industries' current approach to building and obtaining such licences, pointing out that a greater focus is placed on reducing direct opposition to proposed projects than on truly engaging with communities throughout the lifecycle of the project.

While research on social licences to operate and examinations of corporate social responsibility continue to be investigated, targeted examinations of how communities are engaged in mining operations, and how this engagement influences the formation of perceptions, have received little attention.

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