THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN MINING’S COMMUNITY RELATIONS RESEARCH UNIT PRESENTS:

COMREL CONVERSATIONS

A podcast series to build knowledge and share experience from a practice perspective.

Recorded at The University of Queensland in July 2013

Interviewee: Bruce Harvey
Interviewer: Dr Deanna Kemp
Transcribed by: Carol Bond
Recorded by: James Morrell

Recording available online at: www.csrm.uq.edu/comrel
Bruce Harvey is Global Practice Leader – Communities and Social Performance for Rio Tinto. With many years’ field experience in different parts of the world, Bruce is in a unique position to reflect on community relations and development practice in mining. Interviewed by: Dr Deanna L. Kemp (July 2013)

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

DEANNA: Welcome to ComRel conversations. ComRel is the Community Relations Research Unit at the CSRM. This morning we have with us Bruce Harvey who is Global Practice Leader – Communities and Social Performance for Rio Tinto. Welcome, Bruce.

BRUCE: Thank you, Deanna.

DEANNA: This is our second conversation of the ComRel podcasts where we aim to talk to people who have a very good understanding of the Community Relations and Development space in mining. It’s about sharing experience and learnings with people who have been very close to the ground. I am delighted to be able to talk to Bruce today. So Bruce, just to start us off, can you tell us a little bit about your current role and your background. I understand that you’ve been in the game now for close to 30 years so it would be great for listeners to hear a little bit about how you started in mining and how you’ve come to the role that you are currently working in.

BRUCE: Let me start in reverse order. I started as a geologist working in the industry 35 years ago and my early career was in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and western Queensland. I was everywhere out the back of Burke, Australia. I have never been to Burke, actually. I must get there one day. Subsequently, I have been to places like PNG, Indonesia, Canada, and you name it. Importantly in my geological undergraduate work I took some history and philosophy. It fascinated me. So when I was working in the field, and in Australia I was meeting Aboriginal peoples and elsewhere peoples of the land, I had some basis for an interest in their connections with the land. I had some basic frameworks about getting to understand, in a theoretical sense, their connections with land. So it was actually very easy for me to develop a rich connection with the lands and the peoples of those lands on which we were exploring. Of course this was very handy as the land rights wars, as they were known, emerged in the 1980’s. Explorers were being locked out and locked off of Aboriginal lands and similar things were happening elsewhere. During that period, even as a geologist, I developed an ability to work with Aboriginal people and get some early access. Of course nothing much could happen until the great seminal shifts of land rights in the Northern Territory and Native Title afterwards. When I took long service leave after 25 years of being a geologist, I went and studied to earn an MBA but I majored in the humanities so behavioural economics, organisational behaviour, anthropology, sociology. Because I realised that getting a social license was the right determining step of development or development consent in the extractives sector. When I came back to Rio Tinto 12 years ago, the numbers don’t quite add up and I am not sure why, then I became
along with two or three other people one of the founding practitioners who set up Community Relations in Rio Tinto as we understood it. And then, that work was mainly in Australia, and then in 2007 in a new role for the group, Global Practice Leader – Communities and Social Performance. I applied and was selected for that global role. We have a small group of people located in various hubs around the world. They are all senior practitioners grounded in both field work and social science. We are the ones that have formulated the policies that Rio Tinto follows and its architecture of control systems and knowledge. We provide assurance to the board of Rio Tinto that Rio Tinto companies are doing the right thing in the social area, social assurance function for the group itself. But we are also able to provide client-based services in areas of expertise that our businesses won’t have themselves. Amongst my team there will be somebody who has some deep knowledge and experience in whatever that issue might be whether the resource curse, managing influx, resettlement, or making agreements with land-connected peoples. That’s what we do and that’s who I am.

DEANNA: Bruce, before we get into the practice space, I also wanted to talk about some of your thinking and some of your writing. As someone working for a company, you have also contributed to the literature over the years. Now this mightn’t be your most prominent piece but it is the first one that I read. I mention it because it links to your geology background and some of the things you are doing today. You wrote the paper for a conference whose name I can’t remember. But the title of the paper was something like “Sociology before Geology – the new social competencies of mining” (http://www.mining.unsw.edu.au/2006_Kenneth_Finlay_Lecture). Do you remember that paper?

BRUCE: Yeah, and of course the title was a bit of a joke at my own expense.

DEANNA: Can you cast your mind back and tell us why you wrote that paper and about the point you were trying to make and whether those arguments still hold today?

BRUCE: When we started doing communities work in the resource sector, in a professional sense 15 years ago, there was no body of knowledge or corpus of architecture around what you should do, how you should do it, and how it should be assessed. There was no competency framework. So, we were very fortunate to have Prof Glynn Cochrane working at Rio Tinto who was one of the first to bring a replicable knowledge base and a scientific approach into the company. We are all very grateful to him and I learned many, many things off Glynn. He came from a background in Development Anthropology. It was very evident to us that there have always been community relations in the extractives sector. You always have to get on with your neighbours and it’s been done in a fairly ad hoc, spontaneous way. People might have been selected for a community relations role because they were the nicest on site who didn’t want to work anywhere else. People just made it up as they went along. There was no body of knowledge. There was no discipline to it. When I joined, working with Glynn and a couple of people in the group, we determined that we really needed to introduce what I call control architecture. It’s
akin to where the environmental sciences were 30 years ago. We knew that we had
tailings dam issues. We knew we needed to manage biodiversity better. What was
happening at that stage was that an amateur biologist or a geologist with a bit of a
green thumb was asked to do the job. It’s taken the environmental sciences 30
years to develop this architecture around what they do in the resource sector. Well,
we are about 10 years into it. So the purpose for me about writing papers and
thinking about things very deeply and reaching into other branches of social science,
or THE branch of social science – because there was no social science for the
extractives sector, it’s only just emerging now. The point was to start working on
that very matter of determining that there was going to be a professional discipline
about what we did. We could codify it. I don’t mean to suggest that it can all be
broken down into a formula and that it can be followed in steps A thru D so that E
automatically happens. Unless you have this corpus of knowledge that is replicable,
testable, peer-review-able, then you have nothing. You are just making it up as you
go along.

DEANNA: Well, I won’t challenge you on that one. Let’s talk a little bit more about some of the
changes you have seen in the professional practice space. You have described this
shift from ad hoc and no knowledge base to more consistent architecture,
companies thinking and talking about competency, having a discipline or what you
call a ‘control architecture’. In other words you describe a shift towards
professionalization, can you talk to us a little bit more about the changes you have
seen on the ground in the way practitioners conduct their work? Any shifts in the
way managers approach this work at the level of projects or operations? Just from
what you have observed from your work around the world what have you observed,
to pick your brain a little bit more on some of the major changes we are starting to
see in practice.

BRUCE: Well, implementation is very patchy. It’s all very well to have this corpus of
knowledge that I have been talking about but the degree of competency that various
operations, sites, practitioners, and just as importantly people in general
management roles is highly variable; just as it is with any other professional
discipline within the mining sector. Some geologists are good, some are not so
good. Some engineering projects completely fail because the people trying to build
them were incompetent. So we are never going to expect everything to be 100%
fantastic just because at last we have this professional body of knowledge. Where
the improvement is, people now can pursue a career. They do know how to frame a
personal development pathway. Enlightened and successful companies can put in
place a department staffed with people who know what they are doing, who have
the lessons of history, who can study, analyse, synthesise, peer-review and do work
in a professional way. It is possible now for people to actually improve and get
better. It was all a bit of a random walk before. I think that is the biggest
improvement all around. At a personal level people can develop and improve and at
a company level, corporations and companies can develop and improve upon their
successes. Of course, recidivism prevails as it does everywhere so there are always
backwards steps and all that. But there is really no excuse for putting failure down
to bad luck or fate or it just wasn’t supposed to be this time. There is actually a way of doing this work properly.

DEANNA: So in terms of professional bodies of knowledge, career paths and known pathways is what you have described as some of the changes we have started to see in the practice space. What about challenges for practitioners on the ground. You talked about the career path for practitioners that we are only just starting to see some of that. Of course it is also very difficult because these people are so dispersed, they are working across boundaries, sometimes in multiple languages and their knowledge is quite situated and tied to a particular place. They are less mobile than other professionals in the mining industry. So we are starting to see some really tricky things to think through in this practice area. What would you offer in terms of advice that you might give practitioners or even companies themselves around career paths in this space?

BRUCE: The first thing that we have to say is that there is no such thing as an uninterrupted vector. Just as in any professional career for anybody, people have to expect setbacks. They have to expect long periods, perhaps years, of isolation and intellectual loneliness of being in a role where there is not a lot of encouragement or comprehension from senior management. Those periods in people’s career, I think of them as character building. At some point you have to make a decision to either bail out and go somewhere else or give it a substantial period of time. I have had a number of these periods in my own career and I usually chose to hang around. I have found that the career hurdles brought on by incomprehension from within the company, those hurdles remove themselves before I do. So I am a strong advocate for loyalty and what’s known in the movies as ‘grit’. You do have to hang in there and get your satisfaction from doing the job professionally against all the constraints that prevail. Industry goes through cycles, of course, we have had a fantastic boom cycle over the last decade and now it’s tough times. Both of those extremes of the cycle carry dangers. When there is too much money, people do some stupid things and senior management starts spending money on silver bullets and other gifts that communities cannot afford and hoping that they will solve issues quite quickly. The other end of the cycle, of course, everybody gets laid off. Community relations, like geology, is one of the areas that is cut back quickest and in many instances the most deeply. Then we have to learn all over again. Nevertheless, within the variability brought on by career opportunity and extractive industry cycles, there is a steady progression and improvement in the way we approach this work.

DEANNA: You have talked a little bit about cost pressures, about the pressure of implementation, about the knowledge bases being built, about the fact that implementation can still be a huge challenge. I wanted to ask you a little bit about the pressure of relationship building. I know that Glynn Cochrane and yourself have kind of toyed with the concept of a relationship platform. I would like reflections from you about what that work has been like for you, building the relationship platform, holding that relationship over time, and particularly from a practitioner perspective, what are you hearing as you travel around to all the Rio Tinto sites.
What are practitioners doing about building and maintaining and sustaining this relationship platform, how difficult it is, what they are struggling with, what they should be focusing on in terms of making sure that the platform is stable and doesn’t tip or reach an unrecoverable tipping point?

BRUCE: Let me put a few definitional foundations in place. People will talk a lot about community investment, about corporate social responsibility, about social licence. There are any number of acronyms out there. Let me take three of them. One is regional development. Regional development, for me, is the programs and tangible contributions that a mining company will make hopefully in partnership with others into building an economy in the region that hosts the mine. Now, they can be very big ticket items such as shared infrastructure, railway lines, roads, ports, airports. It can be training centres. Many of these things are good for the mining company anyway, we have to do them anyway. But by doing them in partnership with others, expanding their availability to the local population, you are contributing directly to regional economic development. Then there is the intangible side of it that doesn’t involve bricks and mortar but are equally as important if not more. The first is jobs. Jobs for local people, employability, training, the ability to enter the cash economy, the paid economy in areas that it hasn’t existed before, local procurement, working collaboratively with local leaders to form stable governance platforms in the region – institution building as they say – that’s regional development. It costs a lot of money. It is the biggest cost we have in the area of working with communities. It doesn’t necessarily buy you goodwill, interestingly enough. That is the nature of humanity. Gift giving is a reciprocal activity. Most of our people don’t understand the nature of gift giving. If you continually supply gifts that cannot be reciprocated, it will lead to at best dependability and at worst resentment. So people think they are buying goodwill and it’s not what they get necessarily. This is not an argument not to do it. Of course we have to do it. Social performance is another acronym that is thrown around. I just think of that as audit and proving to the outside world that we’ve done all the things we said we were going to do. It’s an audit or assurance procedure where you tick the box, you go down, it’s metrics and the kind of thing consultants love and the World Bank and everybody else. Local communities don’t necessarily understand the metrics we are using it, they don’t even look at it. They much prefer to measure us on their day-to-day experience and on anecdote. Again, you have to do social performance. It doesn’t earn you any goodwill but it validates and verifies what you say you’ve done. Then you get to community relations. It is day-to-day, face-to-face engagement with host community people on the things that they want to talk about. Not what we want to talk about, what they want to talk about. Then gradually, you might be able to weave in things that are important to us. Now the interesting thing about community relations is that is where the goodwill is really to be earned. It doesn’t cost a lot. It’s people’s time. It’s not about gift-giving and banner waving. It can be meetings on the road. It can be inspections of local roads with local authorities. It can be facing up to complaints and answering them and responding to them. It can be getting involved with what local people do, what is important to them. I assert that this is where most of the
goodwill comes from. It doesn’t actually cost a lot of money. Now, the important thing about community relations – and this is what all practitioners need to understand – is that they are not to monopolise community relations. The relationship should be with the operation, with the business itself. This means getting general management involved and not leaving it to marginal fringe dwellers called communities practitioners who hog the relationship for one reason or another. Very frequently, they are told, ‘Yeah, well, it’s your job to get out there and mollify the public. We really don’t want to see them around here’. So the community practitioner’s job is to work consistently hard to ensure that general management is involved in those day-to-day engagements and that they know how to behave in those engagements. So they bring a sense of professional coaching to their management team in terms of coming out to the community, a lot, engaging the community on the terms the community wants to be engaged on, so it’s not to be turning it into another publicity event. It’s to coach people on how to make it a listening event and then staying in the background until you are actually required, in your professional capacity, to step in. But not acting as a shield for general management but encouraging general management to come into the fray, join the conversation, know how to behave, and enjoy it.

DEANNA: The work that you describe is extremely complex it is about understanding very complex social contexts and social relations, it’s about coaching general management about how to move across that kind of internal/external boundary, it’s about staying in the background in a supporting role. How do practitioners gain legitimacy working like that? Oftentimes, you’ve got to prove your worth, you need to be quite prominent. What you have described is a huge challenge professionally for most people. What advice would you give or what reflections do you have for practitioners or managers who are starting to think very carefully about the value of building this relationship platform and this community relations work as you’ve outlined is different from regional development, different from employability and procurement, different from but related to social performance and the measurement aspects of it. This is relational work that supports all of that other work. But in terms of moving this practice forward, what you have described is a huge challenge. What should the mindset of practitioners be as they try to hold ground, as they try to convince management that their role is legitimate, that staying in the background is a legitimate place to be. How do they get that ear?

BRUCE: Well, communities practitioners, like any professional in the mining sector who wants to excel, they are going to have to be intrinsically motivated. All the management systems in the mining sector are predicated on some sort of extrinsic motivation, the rewards of pay, etc., etc. True professionals, who excel, are not in it for the money. It doesn’t matter whether you are a geologist. A true exploration geologist absolutely wants to discover something and go down in history. A metallurgist wants to get the recovery to the maximum possible extent, he wants to fine tune a concentrator like a musical instrument. So, a communities practitioner needs to be the same. You need to love what you do, you need to be in it for the right reasons, which is to say that “I’ll be here for 12 months and I’m being paid very
well and then I can go off and do something else”. It’s professional motivation which is going to bring out the best in community relations practitioners. In order to do that, they will have to explore a whole series of knowledge areas and experience. That’s why coming to the course at CSRM is very important, extensive reading, anthropological texts, sociology, and a broad-based self-education and yes, philosophy. Because how on earth are you going to survive on a quite alien and confronting circumstance if you don’t have some philosophy to fall back to. Let’s face it, a mine site can be one of the most alienating places in the world. In that way, you are building your self-confidence and you are building your own career. You are not just turning up for work every day because you are being paid for it. That’s the only way you will get the most out of people.

DEANNA: Bruce, in this area of work, and this isn’t particular to community relations in mining because we see this in many other professional areas as well, the community relations practice teams are often international expats, they are often national staff and then there are often people who are local-local who have kind of been hired because they have very context specific knowledge. For those local-local staff, so people who are from the area where the operation is built, is there an additional layer of complexity for them in terms of how they think about this area of practice? This profession they have entered into?

BRUCE: Well, I think inevitably they become incredibly compromised. There they are, living among close relatives and people they have grown up with, and they frequently have a huge personal, social capital. We are asking them to trade on that all the time. To a large extent, the expatriates or the outsiders who have come in have to understand that and protect them from that. And not ask local-locals to pass on messages or to make decisions on behalf of or to actually do things that are inappropriate in their own social context. So understanding what they can do and what they cannot do is very, very important. Now, people who are local-local have a very frequently a deep local knowledge of course and they think very clearly about where they fit and how their society works. That is why we have employed them. Much of that understanding is going to be site specific, it will not be transferable. But for some people, it can be. Some of those people will be wanting to pursue a career, perhaps not many of them. Let’s face it, if you haven’t had the kind of demanding undergraduate education that professionals had at the age of 25 or 26 when you find yourself having that option, it can be fairly difficult. In fact it can be very, very difficult if not impossible. You have to switch from one mode of thinking into an entirely different way of thinking in a different discipline. But some people can do that very, very well. I don’t accept that communities work is not a transferable profession. You can get true professionals who rise to the top of their game. Who can, once they have taken on board the requisite professional qualifications and knowledge, move from site to site around the world and be a subject matter expert.

DEANNA: What about the other side of the fence, the mine managers. What are the kind of shifts that might be required from those in decision-making positions that may not
have had any training but now hold the purse strings, make key decisions about where infrastructure goes, what’s budgeted, how grievances are responded to, all of those kinds of things. We can think about it from the other side of the fence as well.

BRUCE: Increasingly, as social licence becomes the key determinant about whether a project gets up or not, the market will decide who succeeds or fails. Project directors who understand the social project will by and large succeed. Those who don’t, will not. That will sort itself out over time. Those who seek to expand their knowledge and their competence by specifically going on courses and learning on the job. I am pretty confident that it will happen. There will be a lot of damage and a lot of failed projects. But over time, it will improve. You are absolutely right, the key is not so much the competence of community relations practitioners but of those in general management roles; who don’t necessarily have a propensity for thinking like this. The mining industry is dominated by financial types, or commercial types or lawyers or engineers. To think more expansively and in a broad-based way is quite a challenge for them but it can be done. Now the biggest area of deficiency that I see in the way that competency is placed in the mining sector is that very few places have what I call a true cultural induction program at the site. There are some in Australia of course and in Canada. But we don’t provide the right level of introduction and challenge beyond some sort of glib two-hour silly course on the shallow things about national character or national characteristics.

DEANNA: These positions turn over quite often. The General Manager, Senior Manager Operations positions can turn over every two or three years. Yet the community relations practitioners are often there for a much longer period of time. So you are suggesting more of a professional induction into those roles.

BRUCE: Absolutely. There is no mystery about this, by the way. The Defence Forces do this extremely well. They don’t put Australian soldiers into Afghanistan without giving them some deep grounding about how the society works there. The diplomatic corps do that very, very well. There are a number of other international companies that provide that deep grounding for expatriates when they go into an environment where they haven’t been before. I’m not just talking about off-shore environments, by the way. Here in Australia, if you go up into a frontier part of the country, Aboriginal culture is very, very different. So getting a grounded knowledge about how people live their lives around here. Teaching and learning in a way that is not rapid-fire, it’s not working your way down a questionnaire, you actually have to get away from the mine-site, get away from the technology and go and listen to people themselves.

DEANNA: So, you are talking about much more immersion and exposure from those senior leadership people. I think that is a very positive note to finish our conversation on. Thank you very much Bruce Harvey for joining us on ComRel conversations this morning.