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.

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www.csrm.uq.edu/comrel
Anthony (Tony) Kelly was senior lecturer in Community Work at The University of Queensland for over 20 years and has worked as a consultant to government, corporations and NGO’s in ways of working with communities. He has also worked with Oxfam Australia on training programmes in Indigenous Australia and overseas. Tony is an authority on community relations practice in mining, and has trained many hundreds of people. He has worked with major extractive industry companies worldwide on their community relations and human rights issues. He remains committed to dialogue-based community work as fundamental to the achievement of equitable development, including in the global mining industry.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Deanna: Tony, welcome to ComRel conversations. This is our very first conversation of the Community Relations Research Unit at CSRM. What we are aiming to do is talk to people working really closely in the community relations and development practice space. It is about sharing experience and learning amongst people doing this work day to day. I am delighted to be able to talk to you today. I have known you for more than a decade now. I would like to be able to share some of your experiences with people who are going to tune in.

Can you tell us a little bit about your background? You don’t come from the mining industry and you have brought years’ of experience to this professional practice space. I think it would be good if listeners could hear a little bit about where you have come from.

Anthony: Thank you for having me, Deanna. I am approaching my 70th year so to tell you a little bit about my background is not an easy question. But I have been very fortunate. I have worked, all my professional life, beginning in my early twenties, in the community development area. So, I don’t know much else. Obviously, over such an extended period approaching 5 decades in the area, you do accumulate a little bit of experience in the community development area.

Deanna: Your work started in Australia and then you did a lot of work in India, as well.

Anthony: I have done a lot of work all over Australia, in every state and in many small communities; both at the government and at the community level. For the first ten years, probably even closer to fifteen years, I really did only work in Australia. I was taught by a very wonderful teacher here at the University of Queensland who was taught by the great Ghandi. He profoundly influenced me and gave me the first professional opportunities to work at the international level. I was very privileged to work with him in cities like Calcutta and so on. He introduced me to the Ghandian tradition of dialogue which has played a major role in my work and what I have tried to share with the mining industry in recent years.

Deanna: Just before we get on to the mining industry, which I really want to do, can you tell us how you have been a practitioner but you have also been a teacher in the latter years. Is that right?
Anthony: Yes. I started my career as a practitioner, working with young people and homeless people. I did some work with the government trying to establish processes for Aboriginal people with regard to mining, many years ago. I worked with Aboriginal communities establishing local government structures after land rights were given to them. Of course I have been involved for many, many years now with that great Australian development organisation called Oxfam. So, that was primarily where my professional practice lay. But when I did my post graduate studies, I then became an inadequate academic. So I taught here at the University of Queensland for twenty-five years, eighteen of which I was in charge of the practice centre.

Deanna: Teaching and practice has been very much part of your career.

Anthony: Practice has been everything for me. I absolutely love theory when it works, when I can see it actually helping people it gives me a great thrill. So does research, too, but only when it is really applied. In this area, I have to see that it is working for the poorest people in the world. When it does, I get a great kick out of it. I have loved the mixture of practice and theory and research. But, if I had to choose between the three, and thankfully I have never had to, it would be practice.

Deanna: Let’s move to community development practice in the mining industry. You have had such a long career but in the last ten years, as I understand it, can you tell us how and why you brought all this experience to bear on the mining industry? What has kept you in that space?

Anthony: There are personal and professional reasons and so on. It’s obviously a complicated story. I was very interested in the mining industry always because they are one of the very few industries that have a vested interest in remote areas. They live and work in areas that have populations of people who are poor, struggling and disadvantaged. Their entry into those worlds can make the lives of those people much worse. But they also have a tremendous opportunity to make the lives of those people a lot better. The geographical reasons appealed to me but also because of the Australian context and being a great mining country, I think we really should lead the world in so many aspects of work in this particular industry. So when you and others from BHP Billiton ask me to take a leadership program to India to show them what community development work is about but also to show them what bad mining practice can do to particular people, I think it was a profound experience for a lot of people. I can remember one very, very senior executive in BHP asking me directly – and he was a very direct engineer – he said, “Tony, can you train our people in community relations work?” I said, “Of course we can. We can professionalise that area.” That was a great opportunity.

Deanna: You have been doing that work now with not only BHP Billiton but also other companies beyond India and around the world. Can you give listeners an idea of the spread of work you have been able to do?

Anthony: In terms of the geography or content?
Deanna: Let’s start with the geographic so people can have an idea of the countries where you have trained community relations practitioners. Then we can talk about the content.

Anthony: In Africa, in places like Guinea and South Africa. In Asia, India, Pakistan, Mongolia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia. In South America, Chile, Peru, Colombia. In the Caribbean, Trinidad, the Dominican Republic. In North America, the US and Canada. In Australia. There must be others.

Deanna: There are not many people who have taught community relations and development practice in mining in that many places around the world. Can you tell us a little about some of the key concepts, or without being able to share with people the very important material that you cover in your trainings, can you give people a sense of the key messages you leave with the thousands of people you’ve trained?

Anthony: Basically, there are three primary agendas. The first one is to improve the professional dialogue skills of the community relations staff. On the whole, they were appointed as people with a good heart who wanted to do the right thing by the community. They are some very great people. But they did not have any professional standard for what they were doing. So one of the key agendas has been to provide a professional methodology for community relations people. That is really about dialogue skills. There are four serious skill sets with regard to professional dialogue. The training has been associated with those skill sets; a lot of them to do with managing the text, what people say and do, and respond to that appropriately, sensitively and accurately. That has been a major part of the work. It sounds so easy, but those who know this work understand that it is very, very difficult to do. The little test that I give is, “can you repeat back to me the last 15 sentences that I have said?”

Deanna: Well I certainly couldn’t do that.

Anthony: People live in their own world of interpretation, not in the world of the community. That has been a central problem for the mining industry. Their staff, who are not trained, bring back their interpretations of what the community is saying and not actually what the community is saying. So, that is the whole area of dialogue that is very, very important. Where we have done that, we have seen marked improvements in the relationships between the company and the community.

Deanna: That is the next question I have. What are some of those key changes you have observed about the industry’s approach in this area; whether it is one company you have gone back to a few times and you have seen progress in the dialogue practice or whether you are seeing changes across the industry more broadly?

Anthony: The progress has been uneven, unfortunately. I wish I could report better news. I think the biggest change has been the appointment of some very, very good people in a variety of companies now. Where community relations staff were appointed a few years ago, now they have gone to being the very best to being head-hunted
where serious appointments have been made and companies have done very well. I think that is probably the biggest and most hopeful change that I have seen. I think the other change is that there are no easy sites anymore around the world. The issues for the mining industry are that they are mining in more remote and more difficult or conflict-ridden areas, areas of greater poverty. These issues associated with the mining industry and the community are really in the face of the decision-makers within the mining industry and with governments, of course. So, they are big changes. The days of riding in and digging a big hole and leaving are well and truly over.

Deanna: Do you get an opportunity to engage with the leadership? You do engage with practitioners on the ground about some of those conflictual conversations, every day. Do you engage at the senior levels, are they tuned in to the need for careful dialogue in every day conversations?

Anthony: I think it is one of the biggest issues facing the mining industry. What the current reality is, and it is not only associated with the mining industry, if there is no noise it is all right. Communities basically need to throw rocks on railway lines and create noise and protest to be heard and to be listened to. Some companies have even got the system of green-orange-red lights. It doesn’t even get to management’s attention unless there is a red light and by then, of course, it is too late. So, that whole area of being able to understand the nature of the relationship between the company and the community is one of the most important challenges. It is the most important area of future research, to find out from modern day managers how they want to hear about community issues and for us to be able to change enough to deliver the message to them in ways that they can understand. Because the old Richter scale of 1 – 7 and I don’t even worry about it unless it is a 7, is really not a good way to develop a relationship. Just looking at a marriage or a family, you need to do more than deal with the crises to maintain the relationship. So, it’s no different with communities. I have two research agendas, but that is one.

Deanna: What is the second one?

Anthony: The mining industry is full of very bad stories and those bad stories are actually very badly documented. They are full of guesses and peoples’ opinions and approximations. There are actually only a few case studies, bad case studies, where there has been enough documentation and material that we can actually learn from them. That’s quite interesting because nearly all the stories are negative. So, what I have been encouraging researchers to do is to hunt out some really good examples of – which there are emerging some very, very good examples – working very constructively with communities on very difficult issues. It is for us to understand how those processes have worked and to promote them. I don’t mean promotion in a PR sense but in a professional development sense.

Deanna: It is very difficult to get access, but companies are giving us the opportunity to go in and ask those questions. Still, the poor practice case studies with good methodologies are not done as well as they could be done.
I wanted to move through our conversation to talk about practitioners and their work. We have talked about leadership and research agendas, but many people will tune in as practitioners from those locations you have mentioned. Can you give us a bit of a sense of what it is like for them? What are their day-to-day challenges? What is top of mind for community relations practitioners whether in a conflict or poverty situation?

Anthony: My distilled answer to that, and it obviously varies from place to place, is the three C’s. The first is competence. Sometimes the competence is there but not understood by the management. Sometimes the workers simply do not know what to do. So there is a real issue for workers in their day-to-day work associated with competence issues. There is almost no company that is professionally supervising their workers. They are supervising them in terms of projects but there is very little professional supervision for them or opportunities for them to actually have a look at their practice.

Deanna: This professional supervision happens in other professional areas such as Human Services, Social Work, and Psychology.

Anthony: In these areas, where you are involved with human relationships, that self-reflective capacity is a very, very important professional attribute that you can critically but not destructively look at your role in the relationship and be able to understand and move that forward. That professional competency area is one. There is one company I am dealing with who have brought together a senior professional leadership team. That is working really, really well. They have a system where they can ring a senior professional to seek advice. That has been quite wonderful, really. The second theme that is facing them is confidence. Traditionally, it has been quite a small club of professions that have advised the mine manager. It has been the engineers of course, it has been the accountants, and it has been the lawyers. To get a voice around that table and to be confident to be able to speak out when we know that mistakes are being made. Lawyers, in some instances, have taken companies down litigious paths, rather than relationship paths, which have been extraordinarily expensive for both the community and the company. Where if the community relationship team had been given an opportunity to build relationships rather than litigious processes, much better outcomes would have been put forward. I have been encouraging our people to be confident in those forums when they really do think that they can contribute, not to over reach or to displace those incredibly important professional occupations. But for that voice to be heard must be the future as the social and community contexts of the mining industry are becoming more and more complicated.

The third area is that we have to improve our communication processes with the mine management teams and our reporting processes. The tradition, that I belong to, is about 130 years old. It belongs to the non-government world, where we are used to reporting to committees and boards and to the community itself. We really need to understand how we can present this material into the corporate processes.
and that’s why I was saying that research agenda needs to be really considered. What sort of information would help our modern day managers be able to understand and respond more appropriately to the community agendas.

Deanna: Competence, confidence and communication are the three messages. Our final question is the future. You have spoken a little about your experiences, challenges and what is top of mind for most practitioners. If you had to speak about looking forward ten years, can you express what future practice might look like?

Anthony: I have hopes about that. The mining industry is huge at one level but it is quite small at another level. It is amazing when you go on these international flights how many similar faces you see flying from one place to another. It is a very mobile, interconnected industry where the major companies co-own mines and there is roll-over of ownership of mines. It is a very mobile, global industry that is actually quite interconnected. Even the major and minor companies are quite interconnected with one another. This places a very particular responsibility on the Community Relations people. One of the parts of the community tradition has been that it has enabled tremendous variety and application to this particular reality and that particular reality. It didn’t really matter whether you called this same process we are using in this circumstance a different name to the same process we are using in another area. People could learn terminology and processes with their own particular interpretations. I don’t think with the mining industry and its interconnections that it can afford to do that. Some of the key professional frameworks that are named accurately in different ways in the wider community development area, I don’t think the mining industry can do that. I think they need to develop common frameworks and language about that. Some of the phrases like ‘community relations’ sometimes means community development and ‘public relations’ means community development and ‘community affairs’ means whatever. To begin to stabilise some of that terminology will be a very, very important thing for us to do in the future; because sometimes they are operating in the same valleys and with different processes and ways of explaining similar programs.

Deanna: It would certainly make for a more coherent field of practice to move towards consistency and stabilisation of frameworks and language.

Anthony: They succeeded to a large extent in doing that with safety. There are interpretations within larger companies that are quite beautiful but have a slightly different culture about it, but a lot of those processes are a lot more stable. We need to do more of that in the community development area.

Deanna: Tony Kelly, thank you for having this first ComRel conversation with me this morning.