ComRel Conversations

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

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www.csrm.uq.edu/comrel
ABOUT DR CHRIS ANDERSON

Chris Anderson commenced with Rio Tinto in September 2011. He is the strategy leader and corporate functional lead for Communities in the Americas, with a particular focus on Indigenous communities. He also contributes to Indigenous communities work worldwide and provides advice and support to operations on Rio Tinto standards on Communities practice, in particular contributing to the Group’s Community agreement-making innovation and implementation. He is the current chair of the International Council on Mining and Metals Human Rights and Indigenous Peoples working group. Anderson previously served as Director, Corporate and External Affairs, Africa for Newmont Mining Corporation and as Group Executive Social Responsibility in Newmont’s head office in Denver, Colorado.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

DEANNA: Welcome to ComRel Conversations. My name is Deanna Kemp. I am the leader of the Community Relations research unit within the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining. In this series of podcasts, we are talking to community relations leaders and practitioners from around the world about their experience and their views from this field of practice in mining. This morning we are very lucky to have with us Dr Chris Anderson who is Americas Director, Community and Social Performance for Rio Tinto. Welcome, Chris, to ComRel Conversations.

CHRIS: Thank you, Deanna. Glad to be here.

DEANNA: We are going to start, Chris, by learning a little bit about your current position. What are you doing now?

CHRIS: Rio Tinto has a small corporate team that focuses on communities. We are divided regionally. We have a coordinator for Asia and the Pacific, we have one for Africa and Europe and we have one for the Americas. I am part of small team which in turn is part of the health, safety, environment and communities function within Rio Tinto globally. I focus on the Americas, Canada, the US and South America. My role is dual, as is the role of my colleagues elsewhere. We are really about assurance in making sure that our sites and projects live up to the standards that we have set in terms of how they relate to the communities. But also, equally, about mentoring, guiding and assisting the sites to build their capacity, to find the right people for the jobs and to just generally help them get up to speed and do the right thing in terms of their engagement with the communities.

DEANNA: So, a corporate position working closely with projects and operations around the world. So it’s a lot of interaction with community relations practitioners in all kinds of contexts.

CHRIS: Absolutely. Another role I should mention that is not really technically part of my Americas job, is the reviews that we undertake. There are several, but I’ll just mention two. We have what’s called site-managed assessments whereby a small group of people usually a corporate person, an external person and a site or two person. The site does a diagnostic to report how they are doing against their
standards. We as a team assess, through external and internal interviews, how they are going against their standards. The second type is when a site asks for big dollars from the board about something, our project division puts together a technical evaluation review. I have done six or seven of those now which has enabled me to have a close look at the Simandou project in New Guinea, the Oyu Tolgoi project in Mongolia and other bigger projects around the world that are not part of the Americas which has been good. It has given me a global view of what the company is doing and a better sense of who the community practitioners are and where they are around the world.

DEANNA: Can you tell us a little bit about your background then? What were you doing before mining? How did you get into this field of practice?

CHRIS: Oddly enough, it began here in 1971 right here at the University of Queensland.

DEANNA: Well, I was born in 1972 so that’s 40 years.

CHRIS: I did my undergraduate training here in the building right next door in psychology. I completed a diploma in the field of psychology but never practiced because I fell in love with Anthropology and went down the road to the Michie Building and was able to participate in a field trip in 1976 to the Lockhart River up in Cape York with a couple of senior Anthropologists. I just loved that mix of bush work and sitting and writing and reading; and, the scholarly aspect of it as well. So I ended up doing a PhD here in Anthropology with several years of field work with the Kuku Yalanji people on the Bloomfield River in Cape York and living there, learning the language and doing the usual things. I published a lot and taught Anthropology here as a tutor for five years. Then I went to Adelaide to be the senior curator of social anthropology at the South Australia museum. There, I spent three or four years working on the repatriation of sacred objects and some issues around human remains collections in museums and helping rewrite the policy for the National Museum Association around cultural property, basically. Subsequently, I became the Director of the South Australia Museum which took me into a whole other realm of budgets and dealing with crazy curators and crazy ministers. I spent 6 years in that position and then joined Normandy mining, Australia’s biggest gold producer working very closely with Robert Champion de Crespigny, the founder of Normandy mining who also happened to be the Chairman of the board of the South Australian Museum. He created a new executive position for me when I left the museum. I went to Turkey to solve a problem about a gold mine that had been built by Normandy but had been having terrible troubles with the communities around the mine. Government permits had been withdrawn and there was quite a lot of problems. My job was to figure out what went wrong and to fix it. Although I grew up in a mining area of the US, and my dad was a mining engineer, I never had anything to do with that. I wanted to be an academic Anthropologist. So here I was, launching my mining career in 1999 in Turkey. Also, as part of that job I travelled to West Africa to different properties Normandy had around the world. Newmont bought Normandy in 2002 and I went with several of the other executives to the
DEANNA: Almost infusing social science into the corporate side.

CHRIS: I think so. Certainly I wasn’t the only one doing that world-wide, I think it was around about time when a lot of companies were drawing on social scientists; realising that the technical skills, financial skills, geography and all that inside the fence of a mine were inadequate in today’s world. Increasing democratisation, the rise of the community voice, the internet, more NGOs, scrutiny all of these things meant that you had to deal with communities seriously. That requires professionals who can create a knowledge base of how the community works and work with the community in a joint decision-making way, develop grievance mechanisms that are culturally appropriate and so on. It was part of a movement which I think is still coming to fruition about the role of social science in modern mining.

DEANNA: That’s my next question. If we could talk about the role of social science in the mining industry today; how important is it? What kind of roles, including your role, do the social scientists have in mining today? How important is it?

CHRIS: I think we have moved beyond a one size fits all. Because there are different domains we have to deal with. For example in Rio Tinto, we have specialists in ‘gender’. We have specialists in ‘cultural heritage’. Then there are others who have come in from the human rights angle. All of these have become fairly large areas of importance to mining, seeking to diversify the workforce and then with cultural heritage, ensuring that you are including that in social impact studies and environmental impact studies. These are things like oral history and language, not just archaeology and physical remains. We are broadening and drawing on other areas of social science. But deep down, I think that good old fashioned sociology and cultural anthropology are at the base of all that. That’s what you need, and the skills to go along with that and the methods such as cultural relativity, cross cultural communication; those are the skills that are needed to understand a community. That’s the first priority. You can’t necessarily just walk in with preconceived notions such as ‘we’re going to give women a bigger role in decision making here’ because you don’t know how that fits within that cultural context. So building that knowledge base is a really important first step. There are some basic skills in the social sciences that are fundamental to that.

DEANNA: I would agree that knowledge is starting to be built and there is certainly a greater awareness of the importance of the social sciences. What are some of the key changes you have noticed about the industry’s approach to community relations or social sciences? Where have some of the big shifts occurred?

CHRIS: I think it’s around the professionalization. When I first started at Normandy in ’98 - ’99 there was still the trend at most companies to say, ‘Fred is a geologist, but he’s a really nice guy. He’s friendly. Everybody likes him. Let’s let him do the community relations’. Of course people skills are very important, in those days, if you had
anybody managing this area at all, it was very informal and often things were subsumed under environment. I’ve found that to be a very bad thing. People who are good at managing the environment and managing it are often technically minded. They are not the sort of people who necessarily, I do want to generalise here, they are generally not good at the social side of things. And probably vice versa, I wouldn’t know the pH of water if I fell over it. I think there is the professionalization of the social sphere and then the moving out from the environmental stuff. Also, the other move 10-15 years ago, a lot of things were handed widely by the consultants. It was the big engineering firms that did all the environmental assessments. But suddenly they became social science experts as well. Often that wasn’t true. Over the years, a lot of that social science work has been brought inside companies rather than entrusted to consultants. People have realised that it is core business. You can’t have a billion dollar project with 100,000 people around you without also having ongoing maintenance, if you like, of the relationship. You have constant engagement and constant feedback. You have to manage issues of concern, listening and grievances. It’s an ongoing area that you have to have in house; just like you need Finance and HR and so on.

DEANNA: From your perspective, what are the ongoing challenges that practitioners have in this field? Take us to ground, take us to countries that you have visited where you work with and engage practitioners doing the day-to-day stuff, who are in the minority profession on a mine site, with the skills that you just described. What does it look like from a practitioner perspective? What challenges do they face?

CHRIS: Good question. Drawing on people, increasing in industry, with the social science background, the development background or even people from NGOs, that is an increasing trend. But often those people don’t understand the nature of business, full stop. And they don’t understand the nature of mining business and the fact that we are a business who is making money for their shareholder. That’s not to say we aren’t doing well by communities, we are doing good stuff, but we want to exist and that doesn’t happen if we are not generating a profit for our shareholders. Often, people will just leave. It takes a while for people to understand how a business operates if you’ve come from a warm and fuzzy social science background or development. There is that learning curve for a lot of people in that stream. The other one is the tendency to fall into the trap of fire fighting. That’s when the Community Relations team becomes fire fighters rather than strategic planners. Of course, there are lots of fires. But the aim is to set up structures and processes that community members themselves manage it to a certain point. There is a real tendency for management to push Community Relations practitioners into crisis mode. You never really get your breath to plan. It’s like, tomorrow there’ll be road block and how am I going to stop it?

DEANNA: So what is your best advice to help practitioners change that dynamic within their own sphere of influence; to shift that conversation beyond the fire fighting mode and to help more senior people think of them as strategists?
CHRIS: Well, part of it is about leadership. Increasingly, you see practitioners move into leadership roles where they can champion the cause of strategic planning for community engagement, and standards and so on. Having those people in senior roles at the operation, currently there are three examples in Rio Tinto which I know of where we have elevated the manager of Social to General Manager level. At one of our projects in Peru, we have a General Manager Technical and a General Manager Social. That person has an equal say into how things are done. You might have a fire fighting team for crises but you have other people who are doing things like building the knowledge base around the community, documenting communication, working with the community to develop monitoring programs or consultative arrangements. Often it’s about, well you are right, there is a lot of internal missionizing that has to go on. You have to teach your management team the importance of all this. One of the ways we do that is through our Stakeholder Engagement Academy and our Business Leadership Program. At the BLP, we spend a quarter of our time there, and that’s at the Managing Director level, talking about communities and the importance of ‘outside the fence’ and so on. Then with Stakeholder Engagement, that’s for middle management, but it’s across all disciplines. They have residential, it can be up to 2-4 days of focusing on the critical importance of the business to getting the stakeholder engagement right. So I think it’s about a learning process.

DEANNA: From many different angles and at many different levels. What kind of questions should we be asking to support practice improvement in this area?

CHRIS: I think you should demonstrate the rigour you have put into this.

DEANNA: How can we be more rigorous about practice? Prove it to me?

CHRIS: Yeah, demonstrate the rigour of your standards. In the communities and social performance group, we’ve been very strong in trying to develop control architecture. This is a way to take the values the board has put forward to us, the way we work, and we have distilled that to relevant policies and standards. Because we require our sites to report on all that, we are trying to put in as much rigour as there is on the technical side, finance and geology and all that. I think questions around that, there are still people in companies who think at Communities, we are just the nice person who is all warm and fuzzy and likes to talk. We really think there are behavioural things we can question regarding how your employees behave in the community and how do you know you have a good relationship or not with communities? What are your indicators?

DEANNA: It’s building an evidence way as another way to think about it.

CHRIS: A lot of companies I am aware of have great policies, and codes of conduct and lots of nice words, but there’s not a lot of evidence of how that’s manifest or implemented. What are the indicators of whether or not you have a good or bad relationship? It’s like it’s really terrible where you have roadblocks and shootings and all that or it kind of ticks along at a medium level and you don’t really know how
the communities are going because you don’t approach it with that kind of rigorous approach.

DEANNA: What does the future hold? What should we all be thinking about in the next 5-10 years?

CHRIS: I think it is a burgeoning field. I think we are still in the very early days of professionalization of social scientists in a meaningful way in the mining industry. I see it as a three-fold trajectory. In the 60’s, safety became a ‘thing’ in itself. I remember as a kid, when my dad was working in the coal industry, where they started putting up safety numbers such as ‘how many days since we have had an accident’. That was a really radical thing. Safety needed to be tackled, and it was, in a formal way. Now you have a situation where nobody would question that you need a safety specialist to manage safety in any industry but especially mining where it can be very hazardous. The second one is the environment which became a thing that companies had to deal with. Obviously, the records were so bad before on environmental management and incidents, that environment became another one that became professionalised with formal processes. I think we are in the third phase where the social is attaining proper dues as a core business and it’s becoming professionalised as well. So we are starting to get those formal processes that require social scientists. I think it is still growing. People come to me and say, ‘I have an anthropology degree, what am I going to do?’ I tell them they are crazy because I belong to an industry that is crying out for good social science people who are open minded enough to realise that life without mining is impossible. You, as a social science person, can make it better in terms of how it relates to the community.

DEANNA: Yes, and the opportunity to influence.

CHRIS: Absolutely.

DEANNA: Any final reflections? People who listen to ComRel Conversations are often in remote areas doing the hard yards. What is one thought you might leave them with about how they think about or approach their day-to-day practice?

CHRIS: The thing I would say, and I know it sounds trite, is ‘you are not alone’. When you are working in the bush, it could be anywhere in the world, it could be in West Africa or Asia, west of Alice Springs, anywhere. You tend to just get narrowed down in your vision. You have so much going on 24 hours a day. You tend to think you are the only person who has ever faced these problems. But you’re not alone. There are plenty of people who can help. The internet is a fantastic resource to show you that other people have faced the same problems you have. Reach out to organisations like (CSRM).

DEANNA: Connect in.

CHRIS: What we are trying to do with our practitioners is to provide the maximum support to our practitioners so they know there is someone they can lean on and rely on.
They are not alone. I have been there, out in the bush by myself. It is a very lonely thing sometimes. There are other people out there in resources who you can draw on.

DEANNA: That’s a good note to finish on. Thank you Dr Chris Anderson for joining ComRel Conversations.

CHRIS: Thank you Deanna.