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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ABOUT PAM BOURKE

Pam has 30 years of experience working in community development, social policy and planning. Pam has worked to create sustainable change around social disadvantage in community organisations and in local government as the first Manager of the Community Development Services and Social Policy Branches in Brisbane City Council. Pam’s areas of expertise include community development and community engagement, affordable housing and homelessness, cultural diversity, social planning, community facilities development and management and organisational strategy and transformation.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

DEANNA: Welcome to ComRel Conversations. My name is Deanna Kemp. I am leader of the Community Relations Research Unit at CSRM. In this series we are talking to community relations practitioners and leaders about their work, their experience and their views on this field of practice in mining. This morning, we are lucky enough to have with us Pam Bourke. Pam is one of our Industry Fellows with the CSRM, who has taught in our flagship Certificate, Diploma and Master’s program in community relations and natural resource management for, what is it now Pam? Six years?

PAM: Yes, I think we are at the end of our sixth year.

DEANNA: She also works as an independent consultant, and she’ll tell us a little bit about that work. Welcome to ComRel conversations, Pam.

PAM: Thank you, Deanna. It’s good to be hear.

DEANNA: Can you tell us a little bit about your current work, what work do you do now?

PAM: As you have just noted, I have been teaching community relations at the University of Queensland focusing on the resource sector. It’s an online course and I have been teaching that for the last six years. That program has now been picked up by Queens’ University in Canada so I teach into that program, also the Catholic University of Chile. So I have teaching roles in three universities now but all focused around community development and community engagement for the resource sector. I have also been doing face-to-face training, for the last six years, again with the same material, sometimes I am doing that with the Centre for Social Response (http://socialresponse.net.au/). So with Tony Kelly, who you’ve already heard from. He’s a dear colleague of mine.

DEANNA: Our first podcast.

PAM: Your first podcast. Tony actually taught me development practice at university, so it has been a great privilege to work with him and increasingly collaborating with other people. So I have been doing teaching in Latin America, and training in Latin America, Canada, and Australia. I also do some independent consulting with companies, governments and not-for-profits.
DEANNA: Great. Can you tell us a little bit about your professional background, how you got into this field of work?

PAM: Okay, I was a community development practitioner for about 25 years or so. I spent the first decade of my career after graduating here at the University of Queensland with a focus on community development. I came out of a social work degree, but I was always very interested in community development practice. I spent the first decade working in not-for-profits here in Queensland. Then I spent time working in government, but particularly local government. So I was the manager of community development programs for the Brisbane City Council, which is the largest council in Australia. So I had a lot of community development staff and I knew what it was like to work in a large bureaucracy but to try and create pathways for communities so you would have more participation. You were working with communities on how to address disadvantage and generally enable people to participate in the life of the community. Generally, I did that work in Australia and then in New Zealand. In 2007, I decided that I had enough of government for a while. That was when I was invited to develop and teach the courses on community development and community engagement, but focusing on the resource sector. So that’s how that happened.

DEANNA: So you bring all that to the work that you do today with the mining industry.

PAM: Absolutely. What was really interesting for me is particularly because of the experience I had working inside a large organisation and trying to support the development of community development initiatives. It was so applicable in working with the mining industry where you have very large organisations that are often not entirely flexible and where community development and community engagement work is not necessarily seen as core business. It was very similar to my experience working in government. So a lot of the lessons I learned were applicable.

DEANNA: Transferable. So can you tell us a little bit about how you see Social Science, even though your background is in social service and community development. If we wrap that all up in Social Science, how important is that kind of knowledge and that kind of work to the mining industry today?

PAM: I think it has always been quite important but since I’ve become involved, which is the last six years as we’ve just discussed, I have seen a growth in both interest within the mining industry in how they can engage more effectively with communities and build effective relationships that enable them get on and do what they want to do. But also means communities can be confident that impacts are managed and that they are getting benefits from the process. So I have seen increasing interest in the mining sector. There are lots of indications of that. From international guidelines, so many of them have been developed over the last six years that give companies a sense of what needs to happen. The other thing I think I’ve seen is governments starting to integrate social impact assessments into their regulatory frameworks. Communities are starting to expect more, as well. I am seeing that all over the world, not just in Australia, but particularly in Latin America. I think that there has
been a shift, and that shift has meant that companies in particular have started to look for more expertise in this space and more community relations personnel for instance being hired by companies, even the smaller companies. When I started teaching, there were a lot more geologists, environmental scientists and engineers. What I have noticed is that there has been a trend in terms of enrolments that there are more people coming into the courses with more of a background in social sciences and community development.

DEANNA: Let’s stay on this theme of the changes you have noticed in the industry. What have been some of the other changes that you’ve seen? You’ve spoken about increased interest by industry. You’ve mentioned integration and people entering the field from other areas, more people doing this kind of work. What are some of the other changes you’ve seen in this area in the last 7 or so years?

PAM: You know, it’s interesting. People ask me, ‘have things gotten better?’ It’s really hard to answer that question because change doesn’t seem to go in a straight line. It is a few steps forward and a few steps backward, I think. One of the things I have noticed is an increasingly technical orientation. So as companies have started to realise that they need to have more expertise in this space, the big companies in particular have started to develop their own policy frameworks, standards. They are monitoring their compliance with those standards. So the internal space has developed significantly. Sometimes that is also in response to government requirements as well. Now one of the trends I’ve noticed, that worries me a bit as well, is that the professionals who are hired to actually work with the community and with the company to bring them together and build those relationships are spending more and more time in complying with company regulations, policies and procedures; less time and resources actually working in the community on dialogue and engagement. The pressure to feed the organisation, if you like, and meet the organisational requirements is a risk and I’ve seen that growing. So that’s one trend. I think it’s interesting that, with the professionalisation of community relations, you have people in companies who have that role; there is a tendency to then give them the responsibility for dealing with the community rather than seeing it as the whole of an organisation’s responsibility. The community relations professional facilitates, provides advice; yes, does some of the interface but not all of it. Sometimes I have seen community relations staff as the ones who have to manage the whole grievance process. But, in fact, they don’t have the tools or even the responsibility for responding to a lot of the issues people are concerned about. So how you get that integration across the organisation and ownership, that is a bit of a trend I have seen which is a tendency to silo, which I think is problematic.

DEANNA: That can also put particular pressures on individual practitioners. So you have now taught or trained at least 40 people per year going through the CSRM graduate program, plus others in your training work around the world. What are the kinds of pressures you see practitioners being put under, because of what you have just described?
PAM: I think we still have a number of isolated practitioners. Sometimes they are wearing what I call multiple hats. So they are not just having responsibility for community relations but sometimes human resources and public relations. So, isolated practitioners with multiple accountabilities and who are finding themselves really stretched is one challenge. The companies, there is an increasing amount of what I would call red tape. There are some companies that make government look really efficient. That was a bit of a shock for me. I’d love to get in there with a process review for some of them and ask how many steps do you really have to put into this process before something can get approved? If you can’t pay your local suppliers in under ten months, how can you have an effective local procurement process? So, I think the lack of flexibility, lack of innovation, poor processes inside the companies actually increases risk and puts pressure on practitioners who have to spend so much of their time getting through the maze. That’s one thing I’ve seen.

DEANNA: You mentioned isolation, do you see practitioners reaching across organisational boundaries to connect with each other about this professional area of work?

PAM: I have started to see a bit of that, I am seeing that in different parts of the world too. For instance, some of the people who have gone through the courses that I teach keep in touch with each other. I have actually encouraged people to form what I call ‘communities of practice’ so some practitioners within their own companies but at different sites actually phone each other on a monthly basis to talk about some of the challenges or share ideas. That’s one of the other things; you’d be surprised, but even within companies. People will get a piece of work done at one site, another site needs to do it, but they don’t always actually share that piece of work with each other much less between companies. So there is a lot of boundary riding within industry. Increasingly, supporting practitioners after they have had this study to support each other and continue with their professional development. Oftentimes there is a lack of professional supervision for practitioners. They are in very challenging roles as well.

DEANNA: Can you tell us a little bit more what you mean by professional supervision? This is something that we’ve talked about that other professional areas such as social workers and psychologists will have professional supervision, what would that look like in this profession?

PAM: This is something that needs to be distinguished from line management where you have accountabilities to the company which are quite clear. In professional supervision, you are actually helping people both develop their own practice framework so that they understand who they are as practitioners. That they are increasingly looking at ‘what do I need to do to improve the way I am implementing the methodology? I have challenges in the work I do, whom do ask outside who is not caught up in the day-to-day who can actually ask the right questions to help me think outside of the square?’ It’s not just ventilating, it is actually focusing on their personal, professional development as a practitioner. For a lot of people, people ask me, because I do this a little bit for people, where should I go for continuing
education? Do you have any ideas about this particular problem? Are there any articles I could be reading? Is there someone I could be talking to about this? I always had professional supervision throughout my career as a practitioner, even when I was in very senior roles. I found it helped my longevity within an organisation. There are things you just can’t discuss internally because of the people inside who are caught up in the process. So it is just very helpful to have somebody who is an external voice, but who understands the context. It’s a bit of a long answer.

DEANNA: It’s a good answer, thank you. Now it’s my turn to ask you what should researchers be looking at and investigating in order to support professional practice in community relations in mining?

PAM: This was a very interesting question for me. I was pondering it a little bit. People are now starting to ask, how do we evaluate this? How do we know that this community investment is actually sustainable or is making a difference? How do we know that our dialogue in the community is building a more effective and trusting relationship? In terms of practice, where researchers can be very helpful, is to help people evaluate whether what they are doing is actually making a difference and to learn. It’s a reflective process, what worked and what didn’t? How can we build on these methods? It’s not static, they are constantly evolving. For instance, in the practice of dialogue, what are we learning about that in the resource space? How is that different in different cultural contexts? How is that different at different points in the project cycle? How do we take what people are saying and meaningfully bring that back inside the organisation. So, I think the area of evaluation and reflective practice is just wide open. It is also assisting people in knowing how to do that for themselves as well. It’s not just doing it for them, but it’s an enabling process. So that’s one area in particular that we could explore a lot more. Companies are always interested in metrics. How do you turn the qualitative information into the data that then can be useful to influencing companies in doing what they are doing. That is another space that practitioners would find very helpful. Maybe, what are the challenges and how do you document them in a way that doesn’t sound like big problems but opportunities for the future? Ways in which we need to be improving particularly the internal processes within companies to start to make this work more effective.

DEANNA: Let’s look towards the future. What’s in store for this field of practice? Community relations in mining is exciting, it’s interesting, it’s very contentious. It’s also very challenging. What do you think the future holds for this area of practice?

PAM: We have 100’s of people now, maybe more, around the world, who’ve had training in this space, who have the professional qualifications. I am very interested to know what difference that has made for their practice and how are they seeing the future? Are they staying within industry? Are they going into other sectors? What’s been the outcome of all that. We are also seeing people moving into leadership roles. I am very interested to see what’s going to happen as community relations
professionals who are doing emergent practice, dialogue and development work, moving into key roles in industry whether that is within companies or externally? How are they going to be influencing the agenda going forwards? I am very excited about this. There are some wonderful people out there who are incredibly dedicated. They have put themselves on the line. They are change agents, as they should be. There are interesting times ahead. Is there enough of a groundswell yet? I’m not sure. I think we are seeing other parts of the world now really opening up to mining where there isn’t the same level of professional practice happening; companies don’t have access to those skills. So there is a lot of change going on in India as we know. There’s a lot of change happening in African nations. There is a lot of issues and problems and human rights challenges. So, what’s going to happen in other parts of the globe and how can we work to make sure that the lessons that have learnt the hard way in many other places that people don’t have to go through the same issues and problems. That they can take advantage of the skills and experiences of people who’ve gone before. Look, the other place I’d really like to see some development is in the management space. I think managers in the community relations area, and just in companies generally who have some responsibility in community relations, I think we really need to find a way to give them support and to understand these roles and what they need to do to support people. To take the monkey off their back, to get the right level of delegation, to break through some of the red tape, and to start taking some responsibility to make the organisations more receptive and more open and more effective. I think there is a whole area of leadership that we really have to do a lot of work in. I see people not being supported enough by management.

DEANNA: Pam, we’re hoping that people will tune in to ComRel conversations from different parts of the world, just in terms of giving practitioners who might be out there who are feeling a little bit isolated, are there any words of wisdom or final reflections about this area of practice?

PAM: Words of wisdom, hmmmm, don’t give up too easily. Wherever you are located whether it is government, the not-for-profit sector or industry, this work has always been hard and it’s always been challenging. No matter who you work for, it’s often like you are at the margin. So, expect that it is not going to be easy. Don’t be isolated. Definitely try to find colleagues inside and outside your organisation whom you can work with. Try and get yourself mentors and professional supervision to support yourself. Don’t try to be a perfectionist. Don’t try to do 120%. Nobody else around you is. The world will still keep going if you actually go home to your family. Don’t be too responsible for what goes on; it’s a hard space. But actually, you can really make a difference. It’s very important to have people working inside organisations coming up with the right policies, the right systems, to support the development of communities and the building of relationships. It can make a huge difference to some of the most disadvantaged communities around the planet. It’s really worth hanging in, if you are going to be in for the long haul you have to look after yourself.
DEANNA: Thanks, Pam, for joining us for ComRel conversations this morning.

PAM: Thanks, Deanna. It's been great to talk to you.