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Community relations and mining: Core to business but not “core business”[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades the global mining industry has witnessed the necessity and emergence of community relations and development (CRD) functions, essentially under the rubric of sustainable development and corporate social responsibility (CSR). These functions provide companies with mechanisms through which to engage and manage their relationships with key stakeholder groups, share development benefits and protect business interests. Despite widespread claims by the industry that companies have adopted CSR as a ‘core competence’, we argue that the industry has yet to incorporate the CRD function as part of ‘core business’ at the level of practice. This article characterises a CRD function and related processes within the context of a large-scale mining operation in West Africa. Findings reflect a more universal trend relating to the function and organisational positioning of CRD practice in the resources sector. The authors argue that functional equity needs to be established if the sustainable development agenda is to have a genuine future within the mining industry.

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Introduction

Mining companies are in the business of extracting valuable natural resources for profit. The technical, legal and commercial functions which support efficiencies in the extraction of resources are understood as being at the core of this business. Over the past two decades the industry has witnessed the necessity and emergence of community relations and development (CRD) functions, essentially under the rubric of sustainable development (SD) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (International Institute on Environment and Development (IIED), 2002; Buxton, 2012). A powerful pro-social industry discourse replete with terms such as “social licence” (Owen and Kemp, 2013; Prno and Slocombe, 2012; Thomson and Boutilier, 2011), “benefit sharing” (Zandvliet and Anderson, 2009; Hamann, 2007; Muthuri, 2007), “community participation” (International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM), 2012; Kemp, 2010b; International Institute on Environment and Development (IIED), 2002) and “partnerships for development” (International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM), 2011;

McPhail, 2008; Hamann, 2004) has come to stand as evidence of the value assigned to this emergent function.

Generally speaking, CRD provides companies with a mechanism through which to engage and manage their relationship with key stakeholder groups and protect their business interests (Humphreys, 2000). This function is typically charged with operationalizing SD and CSR policy through strategies of engagement, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution and development programming (Owen and Kemp, 2013, 2012; Rees et al., 2012; Kemp, 2010a, 2010b; Zandvliet and Anderson, 2009; Sillitoe and Wilson, 2003). On this basis, it can be argued that the extent to which mining companies value and integrate the CRD function into core business is a direct representation of their commitment to SD and CSR. Despite widespread claims by industry that CSR as a “core competence” (Humphreys, 2000), we argue that the mining industry has yet to integrate the CRD function as part of core business. To support this argument, we present data collected from a series of intensive site-based interviews with CRD practitioners from an anonymized mining operation in West Africa.

Until relatively recently, the internal workings of mining companies have eluded the attention of social scientists who tend to focus their efforts on the impacts of resource extraction. The rise of scholarship from ‘inside the fence’ characterising the industry’s motives, abilities and experiences in the management of social impacts marks a significant point of entry and re-orientation for both industry and the social sciences. In this article the authors provide a rare insider account of how the pro-social discourse of mining is implemented in practice at the operational level.

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In presenting this account the article is structured as follows. Following the literature review, the methodology and data collection process is described. This is supplemented by a high-level overview of the operating context in which the research was undertaken. The remaining sections of the article are dedicated to the presentation and discussion of research findings concentrating on three themes in relation to the CRD function: (i) role and position, (ii) recognition and status and (iii) influence and decision making. To date the case study site has been unable to adopt the CRD function as a 'core' business function. As a concluding argument, the authors assert the need for an 'internal turn' in mines and communities research.

Literature review: an 'inside' view of mining and community relations

Howsoever one chooses to look at it, mining is a contested practice. Whether it is the social and environmental risks (Davis and Franks, 2011; Jenkins and Yakovleva, 2006), the political economy (Bainton, 2010; Rifai-Hasan, 2009; Walton and Barnett, 2008), or the mining industry's development contribution (Gilberthorpe and Banks, 2012; Arellano-Yanguas, 2009; Garvin et al., 2009; Bebbington et al., 2008; Graulau, 2008; Kapelus, 2002), scholarship about the dynamics of the minerals extraction industry is beset with conflicting ideals and opinions. Indeed there is a growing and fervent interest in the corporate response to pressing environmental, economic, political and development challenges that are now synonymous with the sector.

For observers of the industry, the most recognisable response to these challenges is the CSR 'message'. Critics of the sector routinely point out the use of 'greenwash' in corporate reporting where companies take a pragmatic approach to 'selling' their CSR efforts to key stakeholders (O'Faircheallaigh and Ali, 2007; Manteaw, 2007; Hilson, 2006; Hamann and Kapelus, 2004) and limiting their exposure to risk rather than engagement more broadly (Walton and Barnett, 2008). Outside of corporate spin, responsibility for social performance at the operational level most often resides with a Community Relations and Development (CRD) function.² There has been reluctance on the part of scholars to accept CSR efforts made by mining companies as a 'legitimate' attempt at improved social performance, and the emergence of this function is no exception. This view of CSR may well be because scholars and other external observers have tended to examine 'results' rather than 'attempts' to perform. Nonetheless, the nature of CRD practice and related internal processes within mining operations is poorly understood within academic and practice realms.

In their now well-read article 'Resource Wars: The Anthropology of Mining', Ballard and Banks (2003, p. 290) suggested that the "enduring opacity of mining corporations is their notorious reluctance to expose themselves directly to ethnographic scrutiny". It is now clear that many social scientists have for some time had direct access to the internal domain of the mining corporation through consulting, research and social auditing/assurance work (Kemp et al., 2012; Bainton, 2010; Zandvliet and Anderson, 2009; Macintyre et al., 2008; Boele and Kemp, 2005).³ Today, the suggestion that companies are reluctant to expose themselves to external scrutiny is no longer valid in the way described by Ballard and Banks. While caveats may still apply in terms of the release

and disclosure of findings and results, there is no doubt that the level of internal access by external parties has increased.

In mining, researchers who have set their sights on the organisation as a site of enquiry tend to gravitate 'upwards', casting their gaze on the workings of senior management in authority positions and corporate-level strategies (e.g., Cragg and Greenbaum, 2002; Hilson and Murck, 2000). While this has provided important insights into the logic of the corporate or operational centre, the picture is incomplete unless the research agenda also gives due attention and recognition to those areas of the business that have been considered or treated as peripheral. Mining and CSR literature continues to focus on "corporate performance", reflecting the perceived importance of global benchmarking and the industry's seemingly natural proclivity towards messaging through corporate-level sustainability reports (O'Dwyer et al., 2011; Laufer, 2003).

Despite a general paucity of literature engaging the inner space of mining operations and CSR, there is a small yet emerging body of research drawing together organisational theory and ethnographic methods so as to provide a view of mining and CSR 'from the inside'. Sillitoe and Wilson (2003) for example, provided a brief examination of community affairs functions within the Papua New Guinean (PNG) mining sector. More recently, Rajak (2011) focused her sights on global mining giant, Anglo American through a multi-sited ethnography of the company's engagement with CSR. She argues that the discourse of CSR has served to authenticate and extend corporate authority, elevating corporations' status as both "architects and agents of development" (Rajak, 2011, p. 231). Elsewhere, Welker (2009) conducted a critical anthropological study at Newmont Mining's Batu Hijau gold mine on the island of Sumbawa, Indonesia. Welker gives equal attention to company and community perspectives, highlighting the moral commitments of various actors in this contested space. These studies highlight that despite CRD departments providing the main 'interface' between company and community, mining organisations are largely structured in a Western, industrial pattern and do not attempt to reflect or mirror the local cultural context, leading to an ethnocentric approach to engagement. This limits the ability of mining companies in building a meaningful community interface. Despite this important work, the overall corpus of grounded, organisational ethnographic CSR studies in mining remains small.

A common thread within this emerging field of organisational research in mining is the blurred 'boundary' between what can be described as internally and externally-orientated functions. This distinction is less clear when the question of CRD practice is brought into frame. CRD work is characterised by decisions and actions taken inside and outside of company and community 'boundaries' (Kemp, 2010a). It is often local people who are recruited for these roles, precisely because they are embedded in the local context, rather than being familiar with the organisational domain, thus reducing the 'difference' between mine and community (Sillitoe and Wilson, 2003). As the primary point of connection between 'company' and 'community', the challenges and opportunities that this creates for local people, and indeed CSR practice more broadly, remain relatively obscured.

Methods and sample

This article characterises a CRD function and related processes within the context of a large-scale, contemporary mining operation in West Africa. Findings and discussion are drawn from situated engagement by the two authors with thirty CRD practitioners employed directly by the mine, representing half of the

² These departments may be called community affairs, social responsibility, external relations, indigenous affairs, etc. depending on the organisation and the context.

³ A powerful contribution to this field is Zandvliet and Anderson's (2009) text *Getting it Right: Making Company-Community Relations Work*. This book presents anonymised narratives and learnings drawn from more than 10 years of field-based engagement with more than 60 companies in the mining, oil and gas industries.

Table 1
Description of sample.

Sample	Description
Size	30 Community Relations and Development (CRD) staff 50% of the total CRD department
Characteristics	30% Female 80% Tertiary educated, most in a relevant discipline Average of 10 years in CRD field, up to 2 decades 70:30 Ratio of field staff to superintendent/management 100% national staff from host country 60% Local staff
Department units	Land access (5) Community relations (6) Community development (4) Monitoring and evaluation (2) Complaints and grievances (4) Communication (3) 'Embedded' practitioners in projects and exploration (4) Foundation staff (2) ^a
General description of CRD tasks	Resettlement, crop assessment, conflict resolution, culture and heritage, gender relations, community education and capacity building, social impact assessment, internal engagement, infrastructure planning and partnerships for development, dialogue etc.

^a The Foundation is notionally considered independent of the company, but receives company funding and has company representatives involved in the support and management of governance structures.

Table 2
Description of methods.

Method	Description
Technique	Face-to-face, individual interviews and observation
Language	English (official national language)
Instrument	Semi-structured interview protocol
Duration	50–90 min
Location	On site, at the mine
Recruitment	Voluntary, confidential
Recording	Audio and verbatim transcripts
Analysis	Thematic coding for themes, and sub-themes

department's total personnel. A description of the sample is provided in [Table 1](#).

Data were collected by the authors on two separate site visits of two weeks duration. During this time the authors conducted interviews and collected conversational and observational data about the structure and positioning of the CRD function, the level of integration with other departments and divisions, along with the various roles and relationships managed by CRD practitioners, many of whom were local to the area. [Table 2](#) provides a description of the methods applied for the study. Researchers received an extended cultural briefing from country specialists prior to the research.

The research process was subject to full University ethics approval processes and all interviewees provided informed consent following a series of prior notices given by the authors and the local management team. The study was supported by the company with in-kind provision of transport and accommodation, and a University grant was used to support researcher time. Although the research was supported by the company, it was agreed that all interview data remain confidential to the research team.

Operational context: large scale gold mining in West Africa

The mine is an open pit gold operation managed by a multinational company with operations globally. It is not the only mine in the region. The company has made a substantial public commitment to sustainable development and has a relatively

comprehensive social management framework across its operations. The mine was developed in the early 2000s, and commenced production about five years later. There are two main community areas, in the vicinity of the mine, each consisting of approximately five primary villages. The mining project selected for this study is considered a test case for the region and a potential model for responsible mining more broadly. Combined with the regional and global significance of the study location, the 'openness' of the company to examine its CRD function was also a determining factor in the selection of the site. For the purpose of context setting, the pressing social issues relevant to the mine are consistent with those experienced in remote mining locations in other developing nations and are summarised in [Table 3](#).

The CRD Department's Manager is a full representative on the Site Senior Management Group, alongside representatives from Mining, Processing, Finance and other technical and functional Departments. The Manager had been incumbent for only one year at the time of the study. Interviewees described her leadership as pivotal to recent changes and transitions. Interview participants described a Department that had been operating in a more ad hoc manner during the mine's early planning and construction phases. At that time, people were expected to work across the range of areas outlined above. Upon the mine's transition to operations, the company formalised the department and its component sections. In formalising the department, a far more 'structured' approach with defined specialisations was adopted, eventually leading to what participants described as a "silo effect". This effect has been shown in other mining contexts to militate against collaborative problem solving by inhibiting dialogue both internally and externally.

The incumbent manager had sought to address some of the structural and relational issues within the department by increasing intra-departmental communication and section-to-section interaction, including regular forums with her direct reports, monthly departmental meetings and other 'connecting' initiatives, such as defining a common departmental vision. She had also instituted a programme of 'speaking up,' which encouraged employees within the department to express their views and opinions on issues of importance to them or their work. This she considered particularly important in the context of an aggressive mine expansion programme that required the department to rapidly secure access to land. She indicated that collaboration and information sharing within the department was

Table 3
Social issues relating to the case study.

Issues	Description
Social issues relevant to the case study context	Poverty Large scale resettlement Influx and in-migration Agrarian to blended cash-based economy Illegal and small-scale mining Inequitable distribution of development benefits Limited local-level capacity to regulate mining impacts Complex traditional land tenure system Tension between traditional and elected authorities
Grievances and issues specific to the case study ^a	Local procurement and business contracts Employment Land access, acquisition and compensation Livelihood issues Social development funding and distribution Environmental and water management issues Law and order Land speculation

^a While there was a wide and varied number of community-level grievances, the expression of these grievances has to date not been marked by widespread violence or signs of sustained unrest.

important to improved performance overall. The manager was also moving to better define roles and responsibilities, budgets and other organisational aspects. She expressed a desire to ensure that the departmental employees were appropriately skilled, and that the department was in a strong position to exert internal influence and secure organisational resources, with particular consideration of local-*expat* relations given that many senior management positions were held by foreign staff.

Outside of the organisational setting, interviewees described the external context as increasingly complex. A range of issues were discussed in some detail, one of which was the issue of “speculation”, whereby local villages would strategically plant crops and erect structures in areas that the mine sought to acquire in the hope of securing compensation. This issue was of particular relevance during the research due to the mine’s expansion trajectory. Another prominent issue of concern was the increase in illegal mining. Interviewees explained that the area was not subject to traditional forms of small-scale mining, and that “illegal miners” were from outside the area. In-migration was changing local social conditions, often in dramatic ways; a trend well documented by [Hilson and Garforth \(2012\)](#). While in-migration had brought opportunities for some through rent and increased local business interviewees said there was evidence of increased alcohol use and abuse and prostitution. Practitioners also noted a range of other emerging social inequities as some people accessed mining benefits while others did not. The inequitable distribution of risk and benefit is a longstanding and recurring theme in the mines and communities literature ([Walton and Barnett, 2008](#); [Veiga et al., 2001](#)). Interviewees also discussed changes in local political dynamics, with the rise of a new mining class and the shift from traditional agrarian, subsistence economy to a more blended cash economy. The historical interaction that the mine has had with local people from first entry to the present day was said to have shaped the nature of relationships that the department now encounters.

Findings: practitioner perspectives on CRD practice

Roles, relationships and positionality

To a large extent, the types of roles practitioners undertake are determined by the explicit expectations placed upon them by the business. The roles held by CRD practitioners reflect the immediate needs of the business and a broader proposition about what

the CRD function is to contribute to the organisation as a whole. These factors are both central and critical to an understanding of how CRD practitioners come to occupy the professional spaces that they do. These factors do not, however, provide a complete or panoramic view of the roles and positions held by individuals working within this profession. To more carefully appreciate the complexity of these roles one needs to identify the range of relationships needed to perform the work effectively and the different positions or ‘social locations’ from which this professional practice takes place.

When describing the various roles they undertake, practitioners interviewed for this study drew heavily on spatial markers to explain their position and purpose. The complexity of simultaneously managing both personal and professional expectations and obligations was a pervasive theme in the vast majority of conversations, particularly when interviewees were from the local area. Across all of the departmental sub-units, interviewees tended to describe their role as working “in between” company and community as a “middle player”, or a “conduit” in the process of maintaining amicable local relationships. Some described their role in neutral terms, others in more political terms where they took an active role in lobbying, influencing, protecting and/or negotiating on behalf of one or the other party. This shift between roles and relationships was central to many of the experiences, concerns and issues discussed.

CRD work was usually described in terms of negotiating competing, rather than complimentary, expectations from “inside” and “outside” the fence. Many of these pressures were temporal; for example, where the community expected a rapid response to issues of concern, and the company was slow to acknowledge that expectation, or conversely, where the company expected practitioners to “get results” and “deliver on schedule”, and the community required time to build understanding. Practitioners described instances where “rushed engagement” had led to tension because they did not have enough time to “lay the ground” with the community. This tension raises important questions about whether, and if so how, episodic negotiation and ongoing relationship building can genuinely co-exist in the context of a mining operation. Other pressures were related to resources, for example, where the company had made commitments to communities but had not ensured that practitioners had access to the resources required (e.g. vehicles, computers and skills) to deliver.

Several interviewees explained that while the company indicates that it “does not want a cash relationship” with the local

community, when access difficulties arise, other departments often expected CRD to “hurry up and pay off [landowners]” so that mining and operational activities could continue according to the technical plan and without delay or disruption. Considering a large-scale mine in PNG, [Gilberthorpe and Banks \(2012\)](#) highlight how a similar approach to land acquisition has driven local economic, social and political transformations based on large-scale compensation, which has since trumped company efforts to build relationships and initiate development programs. This singular focus on land access and compensation has rendered community relations and development ineffectual and exacerbated the conditions for violent conflict. [Gilberthorpe and Banks](#) argue that CSR is more related to local cultural practices than many companies are willing to admit. A more deliberate focus on socio-cultural variables in situ is needed to ensure that impacted communities benefit from mining, rather than companies simply securing short-term land access with limited regard for conflict and development trajectories ([Owen and Kemp, 2012; Anguelovski, 2011](#)).

Interviewees characterised their work as a process of “pushing” the community relations agenda onto other departments. More recently, the operation had introduced a number of “pull” factors; that is, mechanisms to compel the business to include CRD in core processes, rather than community relations pushing an agenda from outside their sphere of influence. In one example, the push pattern was disrupted when representatives from CRD were formally included in an operation-wide forum as part of the approval process for a major works, which has the veto authority described locally as a “stop-go” power. In practice, this disruption was marginal because on the one hand while it offered CRD a seat at the negotiating table, it did not guarantee their influence in the decision-making process, nor encourage their early involvement in formative conversations about project planning. This is despite the fact that the exclusion of a social perspective is now considered to be a “classic flaw” in mining and community relations ([Farrell et al. 2012](#)).

The purpose and end value of CRD was considered by practitioners to be poorly understood across the business. Interviewees surmised that other functions of the business had developed the impression “that CRD exists to deal with community issues”, which was a result of management being unable to define and articulate the role of CRD in an operational setting. Practitioners felt that other departments did not understand the depth of their knowledge, such as how the system of customary and traditional authority, rituals and ceremonies, cultural beliefs, traditional land use, livelihood strategies etc., intersected with the daily operations of the mine. There was clearly an issue of CRD practitioners having to make their knowledge ‘legible’ to technical and hard science managers, which goes some way to explaining why CRD remains marginal. In the PNG context, [Walton and Barnett \(2008\)](#) highlight how overlooking the importance of this knowledge has created and exacerbated social inequality and, in some instances, spurred conflict.

The CRD department has built an understanding of individual, familial, village, community and regional dynamics using a combination of local knowledge and careful social analysis, but interviewees felt that this corpus of knowledge was, for the most part, not utilised by the rest of the operation. At this point it is helpful to make a distinction between ‘use’ and ‘recognition’. In most instances practitioners inferred that the company could see the use value or ‘utility’ of the CRD function but did not give recognition to CRD when they couldn’t see tangible results. Practitioners lamented that there was little appreciation about the social changes taking place in the adjacent communities, some of which were directly attributed to the presence of the mine. The conclusion reached by practitioners was that a lack of internal discussion about these issues led to uninformed responses to

social challenges, which created a backflow of problems for the operation and the community.

For community relations practitioners who live in the local area, these dynamics are characterised by additional layers of complexity. Local practitioners talked at length about their dual roles as community members and company representatives. Many explained that as members of the community, they have obligations in terms of keeping the community safe from harm and ensuring that they are aware of the potential benefits of the mining company’s presence. They explained that in contrast to the internal space, informal ‘chit chat’ for the purposes of mutual understanding and connection provides *every* reason to meet. In fact, many did this outside work hours, for two reasons: firstly, to maintain personal relationships which were often strained either due to a perception that the individual had “sold out” or due to social jealousy associated with competition for work at the mine; and secondly to compress the time involved in negotiating land access and resolving conflict. While the professional role and personal responsibilities had blended for some, there were few formal initiatives available within the company to support practitioners in balancing these pressures.

Several practitioners worked in community information facilities located outside the physical boundary of the operation and in the heart of the community. Several junior members of the team expressed feeling vulnerable owing to a lack of resources, limited professional experience and little organisational support. As the “first port of call” when problems, grievances or issues arose, these practitioners often found themselves at the end of community frustration and dissatisfaction. A significant portion of the team stated that they had been verbally abused, spat on and publicly vilified by the local community for working for the company. One practitioner explained that many community members don’t differentiate between the job and the person, and that the exchange can become very personal. For field-based personnel, operating outside the fence provided an additional layer of vulnerability because they were often the “last to know” about company’s plans or announcements and had limited connection to the mainstream business. This puts field-based practitioners at a manifest disadvantage both in terms of their influence and position within the company as well as being able to hold a legitimate presence in the community.

Professional status and recognition

In the global arena of mining, companies rely on a broad suite of expert knowledge systems to progress their interests and to maintain the levels of public support necessary to operate. As organisations, mining companies are complex units involving diverse fields of technical interest. Each area of professional expertise within the business organisation is recognised as having a particular function which in turn supports the company as a whole. In this case, it seems that CRD practitioners are generally understood as assisting operations to manage their immediate external relationships so as to provide an operating context that is conducive to achieving the company’s goals and objectives, while meeting the expectations of local communities for respect and reciprocity, often in the form of ‘development’.

The CRD department’s status within the case study context was problematic for many interviewees as they explained how particular departments “de-valued” their work. On this issue they noted their interaction with the Finance department. Several interviewees, most of whom occupied senior positions within the CRD department, indicated that Finance tended to trivialise their work by suggesting that the department “failed to provide value for money”. Interviewees reported that Finance saw the CRD area as a “cost burden”, despite its role in resolving land access and

conflict issues. Certainly the pre-existing community-based relationships described earlier were neither recognised nor valued in the traditional business model, and sat well outside the frame of the budget and resource allocation process. Several interviewees surmised that this “internal perception problem” was due to a lack of evidence demonstrating quantitative value.

The majority of interviewees indicated that when the operation recognised their contribution in achieving a given outcome, recognition was temporary. Other departments had “short memories” when it came to the CRD department’s contribution. In times of relative stability, when company–community relations and tension was seemingly “under control”, CRD was considered to be a “non-issue” for the rest of the operation. Despite the best efforts of practitioners to maintain “peace and stability”, other departments overlooked their relevance. Interviewees explained that crisis situations and critical incidents increased the department’s internal profile. Greater status accrued when CRD practitioners were able to successfully “manage” or “resolve” aspects of the situation which enabled mining to continue. This was followed by what could best be referred to as ‘post-crisis recognition regression’ where status recedes and the profile of CRD returns to its pre-crisis status. Crisis-driven engagement is both a well-established and well-documented pattern in mine-community relations (e.g., Rees et al., 2012; Anguelovski, 2011; Walton and Barnett, 2008).

Practitioners understood the utility of a crisis event as a potential mechanism for leveraging influence, or for “holding ground”. For example, following a series of land conflicts, the department instigated an inter-departmental forum on community complaints and grievances. This led to the establishment of a standing committee, which brought together representatives from a range of departments to address complex grievances which sat across multiple areas of responsibility. Paradoxically, the conditions of crisis provide a beneficial working environment in terms of the acceptance and influence of CRD within the organisation. The example of CRD having the authority and confidence to establish a committee would not have been possible if not for the situation at hand. In this case, the committee’s establishment was further validated by new requirements from the operation’s corporate office for a proactive approach to grievance handling. This sits in contrast to an approach whereby practitioners work to fight their way into conversations with those very departments that cause or exacerbate issues in the first place.

Several senior practitioners said that in the past they had expected the rest of the operation to understand and appreciate the importance of their work by virtue of the company’s commitments to sustainable development, CSR and local community development. They had come to accept that, like other departments, they had to “negotiate” and “compete” within the internal domain for legitimacy and resources. Some said that the department was getting savvier by framing their work in terms of “risk to the business” and/or presenting a “cost-benefit analysis” rather than making a moral case or talking in terms of “value to the community”. Interviewees said that “social value” or “shared value” had limited currency in day-to-day negotiations and did not help to secure resources or support. In fact, presenting a development case was said to have had the opposite effect, with other managers retorting that the company was “not a development agency”. This was a far cry from the corporate ideals as outlined in the company’s policy framework.

It was clear that the CRD department was beginning to take a more proactive and collective approach to internal engagement. There was an acceptance among interviewees that they had not been “smart” about internal interaction in the past. Several section heads explained that along with their teams, they were actively developing techniques to enhance their internal status and

influence. They had begun, for example, to focus on “critical conversations”, which involved identifying key internal decision-makers and actively engaging them in discussions about the importance of CRD and its relevance to the business. Practitioners were aware that they were being excluded from key decisions, and that one potential pathway towards inclusion was to “work their way in” to those exchanges. This strategy of initiating “conversation shifts” aligns with contemporary organisational scholarship which suggests that employees can use interpersonal communication as a mundane device for envisioning, driving and proactively participating in change, noting in particular the usefulness of this approach in structural or systems heavy settings (Moon, 2008; Hardy et al., 2000; Ford, 1999).

When asked why internal engagement strategies had not been devised earlier, practitioners indicated that previously they had not felt like a coherent team of professionals. Several reasons were offered to explain the lack of connection within the team. Interviewees noted that there was a wide range of educational backgrounds and levels within the department. Most employees had completed tertiary education, although not always in a field directly related to community relations, social work or development. Another point of explanation was that the team had organised itself based on issues and had therefore found itself functioning as a disparate group of people focused on individual tasks rather than as a cohort of professionals with a common vision or goal. Finally, it was noted that practitioners were often recruited into the department because they were local stakeholders and this was seen as their main attribute. When pitted against established professions such as finance and engineering, local practitioners said that they had not felt “strong”. Adding to perceptions of professional inferiority was the absence of job descriptions, stark differentials in remuneration, and no formal career or professional pathways for CRD workers.⁴

The paragraphs above describe a situation where CRD practitioners were ascribed – by themselves and others – relatively low status within the company. Quite conversely, practitioners were ascribed a high level of status within their community by virtue of their employment at the mine (aside from any traditional status they already held). Mining jobs were highly sought after as they provided regular employment with a comparatively high salary and a position of perceived ‘power’. These practitioners were subject to the dual expectations canvassed in the previous section. And, although they occupied a role within the company, in instances when the company did not meet community expectations, they were personally criticised. Our interviews did not enable a full exploration of the tensions between the attribution of role status and expectations, but this remains an important avenue for future research.

Connectivity, inclusion and influence

In the previous section where we noted that CRD practitioners were often peripheral to ‘core business’, here we distinguish between levels of influence and levels of connection. For the most part, the function was regarded as pivotal to achieving access to land and strategic relationships within the host community. Nevertheless, practitioners experienced CRD as peripheral from the vantage point of influence but connected in terms of their interaction with other business functions. The high level of

⁴ As a broader observation, we note that in other mining contexts, local personnel are often employed on the basis of their close working knowledge of the community, and their ability to leverage relationships or culture to the benefit of the operation. Unlike other mining professionals (e.g., metallurgists, geologists, accountants, etc.), the professional attributes of local community relations officers do not transfer readily across sites.

dependency from Exploration, Projects and Operations on the CRD function ultimately resulted in high levels of contact between business departments. In this section we characterise the connection and provide an analysis of the use and integration of CRD knowledge by other departments.

The interview data revealed a pattern of inter-departmental interaction whereby the CRD department was more or less excluded from *primary* project decisions; that is, approving and defining major capital works and related expenditure; but was involved in *secondary* decisions; that is, decisions relating to implementation of the pre-determined plan. Broadly speaking, involvement was on an “as-needed basis” and centred on the needs and priorities of the project, rather than the community. For example, decisions to build a road, dam, stockpile or other plant were made without substantive involvement of CRD or consideration of the ‘social value’ potential for the community. CRD practitioners were informed of decisions, rather than involved in primary planning processes. Once informed, practitioners would work to build community considerations into the project plan using the ‘push’ strategy described earlier as the primary mechanism for ensuring involvement. As noted, when the local community exerted pressure, CRD involvement was more likely, but under temporary conditions of duress. The new policy framework adopted by the company’s corporate office encouraged early involvement of the CRD function, but the corporate office did not become directly involved in the day-to-day affairs of the operation unless there was a crisis.

This pattern indicates that CRD practitioners were mostly involved in ‘adjusting’ the agenda, rather than setting it. While the ‘stop-go’ process had begun to change power dynamics, other departments decided when and indeed under what circumstances CRD became substantively involved. We characterise this as ‘connections of convenience’. While dynamics were not static, the onus was on CRD to push, probe and drive the CRD agenda in what could only be described as a non-supportive, even hostile, organisational environment. Practitioners also tended to describe the interaction as a “struggle”, where they have to “fight, fight, fight” for legitimacy, rather than working in an environment that fosters collaboration and co-operation. The majority of practitioners said that one of the biggest challenges of their work was internal, not external. From the perspective of practitioners, the ingrained politics of exclusion was one of the most significant barriers to improved social performance for the company.

There was variation of opinion on the issue of influence, which directly correlated with levels of seniority. Promotion within the department meant a greater proportion of time dedicated to managerial tasks. Some managers had become involved in the emergent processes described earlier (i.e. the complaints and grievance committee, and the project approval process), which had established more permanent connection with other departments and opportunities to exert influence. However, this experience of being involved in planning processes was not widespread. Certainly, mid-, lower-level or “front-line” practitioners – those who had substantial and sustained contact with the community – felt the most disconnected from decision making within the organisation. Again, this situation was not static in the sense that intra-departmental processes instituted by the new manager had created a greater number of avenues for intra-departmental discussion. This shows that processes to ensure that knowledge from the field is accessible to those who provide a ‘bridge’ into other organisational processes are important.

At this particular site, the problematics of inclusion were exacerbated due to the approach taken on land acquisition and permitting, which resulted in the CRD department being advised very late in the process due to the business risk of ‘speculation’. The departmental manager explained that while she has partial

knowledge of plans related to land acquisition and permitting, even she is not privy to the full details of the mine’s plans. This situation highlights a range of challenges from an organisational and relational perspective. First and foremost, most CRD practitioners read this exclusion as a vote of “no confidence” by other parts of the business, signalling to them a lack of trust in the department, and its level of professionalism. Practitioners were frustrated by this but acknowledged that in some cases concerns were warranted. Others read the decision to exclude them as a protective mechanism that sought to shield local employees from pressure from within their communities. Nonetheless, most interviewees commented that rather than exclude CRD from such information, more support should be provided to deal with conflicts of interests. No such training had ever been discussed – in fact the whole issue of exclusion was not openly discussed within the operational context.

A final point relates to the issue of company–community connection. Practitioners explained that some company policies inhibited their ability to connect with the community, such as through standard customary exchanges. For example, ‘gifting’ (i.e. the practice of providing an offering or contribution to the community during a visit) was not permitted without a formal receipt, a rule instituted by the Finance department to ensure transparency and guard against bribery and corruption. However, in this particular context, asking a Chief to sign a receipt when receiving a gift was considered an insult, and was not in line with protocol around customary exchange. Practitioners provided several examples where this approach had inhibited dialogue. Similarly, it was not permissible for community members to be given ‘lifts’ or ride in company vehicles. Practitioners described some of the perverse outcomes of this policy, including driving past landowners who they were intending to meet to request exploration access. In the community, this practice was considered unneighbourly and reflected poorly on the character of the person, as well as on the company. However, practitioners tended not to openly question these policies as they believed it would raise questions about their loyalty to the company, which they said was already in doubt given the issues of ‘speculation’ and their status as a “local local” (i.e. from the area immediately surrounding the mine). Instead they devised ways to bend the rules and work “under the radar”.

Discussion: practice as a proxy for corporate commitment

This discussion centres on three high level issues as direct implications of the data provided above. The points reflect contemporary business challenges for mining companies. The first point relates to benefits and limitations associated with core–periphery thinking. As an explanatory device, the description of functions, values or people as having ‘core’ and ‘less than core’ importance is useful for rendering a picture of power dynamics and for understanding how an organisation measures the significance of its fundamental business components. Where the device becomes limiting, however, is in prescribing core or peripheral status to functions as an all encompassing explanation. For example, CRD may well be described as peripheral because it does not have the same measure of influence or perceived importance relative to other business functions. However, CRD can also be said to be core because without this function, mining companies would be unable to acquire or maintain access to land and other key resources. That CRD can be both core and peripheral not only demonstrates the complicated terrain confronting the function, but also suggests that the pattern of relegating CRD to the periphery underestimates the sustained negative impact on social performance. The lesson in this instance is in recognising the

limits of commonplace descriptors and the consequences of misuse in diagnosing areas of business activity which do not fit strictly within mould of conventional business.

The second discussion point relates to the nature of the relationship between CRD and other functions of the business. It is taken for granted that business functions are required to have a demonstrable purpose. For CRD, that purpose is usually poorly defined by company management, beyond gaining a 'social licence to operate'. The stronger statement of purpose is instead made apparent through the distribution of work requests and the reliance generated in times of crisis. A consistent theme amongst CRD practitioners in this case was that role definition was most clear during crisis events between the company and the community. During periods of relative normality, engagement levels between CRD and the operation diminished. Influence and status drifted, according to the immediate needs of the company. This pattern of engagement within the business can only be characterised as a 'user-relationship'. Practitioners in this study drew explicit links between whether or not the operation needed an immediate solution to an interface issue and their level of perceived worth to the business. This is categorically different from making use of a relationship where the values and parameters are defined and mutually understood. In user-relationships, objectives, tasks and the valuation of importance are uni-directional and place a premium on the use of the other party over and above the relationship itself.

Several practical implications flow out of these arrangements. Most noticeably is the experience of forming fire-fighter type patterns within and outside the fence whereby the company identifies a sudden crisis and CRD is rapidly deployed to de-escalate and limit the spread of the crisis. This 'containment approach' and relationship pattern ensures that CRD practitioners understand so-called core business imperatives. The exchange with communities occurs in a domain that is both physically and conceptually 'outside the fence' for most other managers, therefore the opportunities for a more mutual appreciation of the challenges faced by CRD practitioners, many of whom are from the local community, are often missed or overlooked. The user-relationship dynamic has a compounding effect such that information gathered or lessons learned during a crisis are only occasionally internalised, scrutinised or utilised to support reflection and improvement.

Our final point relates to the impact that these various issues have on the agenda of mining companies and, within that, the configuration of priorities and activities. A consistent theme in interviews and increasingly within the literature is the link between company motives or 'intent' and performance outcomes. What practitioners described as a user-relationship between the business and its CRD function is a direct reflection of the governing logic underpinning community engagement. Numerous examples cases demonstrate the presence and long-term consequences of purely transactional approaches to community relations and mining. In this case, participant narratives about their continuing struggles to engage their internal peers in conversations about CRD priorities, coupled with the experience of exclusion, indicate the usefulness of CRD as a symbolic and functional proxy for how mining companies *really* see their SD and CSR commitments. Viewed in this light, companies, stakeholders and researchers ought to re-evaluate the significance they attribute to the CRD function, and its position within organisational arrangements.

Conclusion: addressing internal and functional inequity

In the context of the global minerals sector, CRD functions inhabit a position of contention and confusion. The contention reflects a wider process of critical questioning by stakeholders and observers about the social agenda of the industry. Inside mining

companies this contention exists in the form of ongoing struggles over the place of CRD work and its value and impact on decision making. Confusion exists over the role and function of CRD work in an industry that does not appear to fully comprehend the demands being levied in terms of benefits, socio-economic and cultural impact management, and participation in development planning. We suggest that the case study data presented in this article reflects this general set of trends and problems. By engaging with company personnel we have provided a more nuanced picture of organisational structures and processes to explain practice and performance challenges. These explanations offer an important perspective, which extends beyond the conventional narrative of policy or moral failure on the part of companies and addresses an identified gap in the literature.

Failure to better include the CRD function in mining will mark a continuation in current trends of mining's engagement and development practice. The implications of internally inconsistent approaches to relationship building and development, suggests that the trajectory of heightening tensions over development and company–community conflict is a foregone conclusion. Countering this inevitability calls for a reconfiguration of organisational structures, interpersonal politics and modes and methods of internal engagement – at multiple levels and across all business functions. Innovations that position CRD functions as valued contributors within the operational landscape are required. There are, for example, mechanisms that are currently applied to external stakeholder relations that may have applicability internally. Professional 'Compacts' and 'Memoranda of Understanding' between technical and social professions, and 'Internal Integration Agreements' between functions and departments, for example, are all worthy of consideration. These mechanisms offer avenues through which to consider issues of internal inequity and disrupt entrenched modes of interaction. The heavy burden currently carried by CRD professionals to push in will prove unsustainable. Functional equity needs to be established if the sustainable development agenda is to have a genuine future within the mining industry.

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